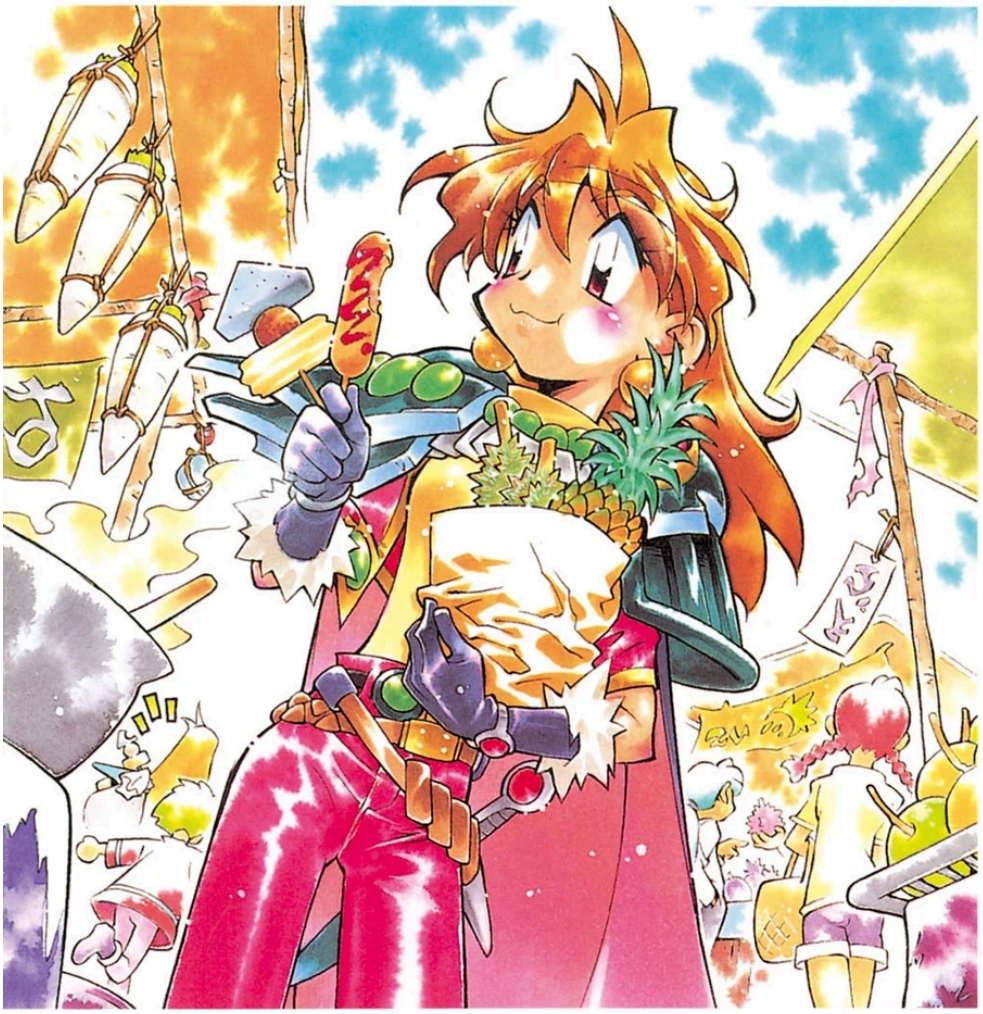
スレイヤーズすぺしゃる⑯

スクランブル・グリル

神坂 一



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富士見ファンタジア文庫

Slayers Special Volume 16

Scramble Grill

By Hajime Kanazaka

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For Whom the Sleeping Treasure Lies (Part 1)

The magical light reflected off the walls, creating a dazzling sparkle in the darkness.

"Nfuffuffufu...♪ A big haul, a big haul!"

Inside the room, which until just moments ago had been sealed in eternal darkness, sat boxes filled with gold and silver jewelry, ornate craftwork, and items that appeared to be magical tools.

"I guess the world isn't all bad, after all," I muttered, beginning my appraisal of the treasure.

—It all started when I got caught in a sudden rainstorm on a mountain path and took shelter in a nearby cave. Suddenly, the ground at the back collapsed, dropping me down a vertical shaft.

I thought it was the worst day ever—until I found that the horizontal tunnel leading from the bottom of that pit connected to *this* place.

It appeared to be a ruin from a very ancient era—or perhaps a hidden storehouse of some kind. There were no guardians like stone golems or animated armor; it was just mountain after mountain of treasure.

To put it bluntly, a place this "delicious" simply doesn't exist!

And it wasn't just one room. There seemed to be several rooms just like it.

"Now then... on to the next room..."

Having finished scouting the first room and clutching my loot, I headed toward the next door.

As expected, the door seemed to be locked, and there might be a simple trap triggered by opening it. Therefore, I chanted a spell and placed my hand on the massive stone door—

"**Dill Brand!**"

Using a spell that interferes with earth spirits, I opened a hole in the door just large enough to crawl through—

And saw light on the other side.

"...Huh...?"

Two stunned whispers rose simultaneously.

Me—and a man standing in the room beyond.

He looked to be about twenty. He had black hair and wore light, mobile clothing with a short sword hanging at his waist. He seemed to be a magic-user, as a globule of magical light floated lazily near the ceiling.

Frozen in the same posture, he stared back at me. Slung over his shoulder was an absurdly large shoulder bag—so stuffed with treasure that the contents were practically overflowing.

"...Y-You?!"

The man was the first to find his voice. Glaring at me as if I were his sworn enemy, he shouted:

"So, you're a tomb raider, aren't you?!"

"SO ARE YOU, YOU IDIOOOOT!"

Wham!

In a single breath, I closed the distance and delivered a flying kick that connected directly with the man's head! His bag hit the floor, and treasure scattered everywhere.

"And besides, stop calling me a 'tomb raider'! It sounds terrible! I am simply a researcher captivated by ancient romance, conducting explorations for both academic study and practical profit!"

"...Isn't that 'practical profit' part exactly what tomb raiding is...?"

"SHUT UP! Besides, you're doing the exact same thing!"

"No! I'm different!" The man sat up and puffed out his chest. "I'm doing this for my own sense of justice! It's completely different from mere treasure hunting for money!"

"Yeah, yeah. Anyway, it's not like one person can carry all this treasure alone, so let's just agree to each scout and take what we want."

"Are you even listening to me?!"

"I'm listening. I'm just choosing to ignore it."

As I spoke, I was already busy sorting through the treasure.

"Why... you...!"

For a moment, the man's shoulders shook with rage—but then...

Sigh.

He finally let out a long breath.

"...Fine. Do what you want. We might not have much time anyway."

He started saying things that made no sense.

"Anyway, if we don't hurry—"

Before he could finish his sentence, a new voice rang out.

"If you don't hurry—what then?"

The voice echoed suddenly through the chamber.

"Tch! They're here!"

The man cried out, frantically looking around. It was a wide room with a decaying wooden floor and stone doors. One of those doors—

Ruuuuumble...

With a heavy groan, it began to slowly creak open. Standing there, silhouetted against an intense magical light pouring through the gap, were several shadows!

"So you were here after all, Neard!"

The man who stepped into the room with a leisurely pace was around forty years old. His black hair was slicked back, and he sported a mustache that was less "distinguished" and more "blatantly weird." He wore flowing clothes that weren't quite robes, but definitely looked eccentric.

Following him were four men and women dressed in similar attire. ...Fortunately, none of them had the weird mustache.

"Still clinging to your stubborn pride! Have you really come back to do something as pointless as this yet again?"

The older man spoke to the young man in the room with an insufferably arrogant attitude.

"Don't act so familiar with me! Father!" Neard barked.

...Wait, these two are father and son?

Neard pointed at the older man. "I told you, I won't accept your methods! I must have told you a dozen times!"

"And I told you a dozen times that what you're doing is nothing more than a child throwing a temper tantrum!"

For a moment, their glares clashed, sparks practically flying in mid-air—until:

"YOU THERE! STOP SCAVENGING TREASURE AND PAY ATTENTION!"

Suddenly, they both pointed at me simultaneously.

"First off, who are you? You appear to be a sorceress, but..."

"From my perspective, you're the mysterious ones. Bursting in here one after another and starting a family feud..."

"—My apologies. I haven't introduced myself. I am Syd Branner, the head of the History Research Department of the Tiagias City Sorcerers' Association. —And this is my son, Neard."

"Tch..." Neard looked away in disgust.

Well, since he introduced himself properly, I suppose I should do the same.

"I'm... Lina. Lina Inverse."

"Ho... *the* Lina Inverse?" Syd's mustache twitched. "In that case, we should speak properly. Actually, I—"

Just as he started to speak!

"**Exploding Smoke Dance!**"

Pop-pop-pop-pop-POW!

"Whoa?!"

Neard suddenly unleashed a spell, causing a series of small explosions around us! The spell had almost zero killing power, but the rising flames and smoke sent Syd's followers into a panic.

In that moment:

"This way!"

Neard suddenly grabbed my hand and tried to pull me along.

"Hey...! Wait a second!"

Naturally, I resisted. But...

"If you don't want those guys to take your treasure away, just come on!"

—I didn't understand the situation at all, but the phrase "if you don't want them to take your treasure" triggered a reflex, and I found myself running alongside Neard.

"...So? What's the deal with them 'taking the treasure'?"

I asked Neard this after we had made it through the cave to a nearby village and settled into an eatery. Neard hadn't touched his food; he just sat there with a bitter expression.

"...My father... he's trying to monopolize the excavation of ruins."

"Monopolize?"

I raised an eyebrow as I bit into some lemon-grass sautéed chicken.

"Yeah. You heard him say it earlier. He's at the Association, researching history. Human history—countries rising and falling, incidents happening everywhere—but the 'history' the world knows now is mostly based on oral tradition. It's a messy mix of fact and fiction. Apparently, his goal is to study actual records and clarify 'true history'."

"...Hmm. That doesn't sound like a bad thing," I agreed, crunching on a side of butter-sautéed carrots.

"Yeah. Even I think the core idea is noble. To do that, you need to thoroughly investigate ancient ruins. My father's argument is that individuals entering ruins, taking treasure, and selling it off for personal gain is a major obstacle to historical research."

"...Hmm... well... that's a fair point..."

As someone who does exactly that all the time, I felt like I was being judged, so I just gave a vague nod.

"—Therefore—his plan is to lobby the Sorcerers' Association to make it illegal for anyone except official research bodies to touch ruins. And of course, in this case, that 'official body' is my father's own research organization."

"I see... so that's the monopoly. —But why are you against it?" I asked.

Whether I liked it or not, Syd's argument was logically sound. It would make sense for a stranger who makes a living from tomb raiding to be upset, but Neard is Syd's son. I couldn't see a reason for him to resist so fiercely...

"...At first, I respected my father and his ideals. He used that logic to lobby the Tiagias Association and establish the History Research Department. He banned other sorcerers from touching ruins... his methods were a bit forceful, but for the sake of uncovering the truth of history, it seemed necessary. Eventually, he gained followers and the organization grew. I even helped him at first. But then—I found out! The truth behind my father's so-called research!"

"—Which is?"

"He does investigate ruins and study history, sure! But if he finds a ruin or treasure

that's outside his field of expertise or too much for him to handle, he buries the information! If he says 'I don't understand this field,' other experts will be called in. If that happens, it would be impossible for him to remain the sole head of the organization. So! Any treasure or gold and jewels that don't seem useful for 'research'—he embezzles and smuggles them! He uses that money to drink, eat, and play around with women! And to top it off! He pressures me to follow in his footsteps, forcing me to wear these weird clothes and grow a bizarre mustache because he claims it's an 'old Association tradition'! Even if he is my father, I won't forgive him! I will deliver the judgment of justice with my own hands!"

"...Actually, I think the 'I hate that mustache' part is the real deal-breaker for you, isn't it...?"

"Th-That's not true!"

Ah. He's flustered.

"But if that's the case, why were you raiding that ruin?"

"Naturally, as a protest against my father! I steal the maps of untouched ruins from his research files, raid them first, and then use the money to drink, eat, and play around with women!"

"Wait just a minute! That's also a far cry from 'justice'!"

"For me, it's just barely safe!"

"It's an out! A total out! ...Honestly, you really are father and son after all..."

"Don't lump me in with him!"

"...Hard not to," I said dejectedly, taking a bite of potato salad. He seemed to be the type who shouts about justice while doing things that don't make sense.

"...Anyway, even if you call it a 'protest,' it's just a nuisance. I don't think your father is going to change his ways because of that."

"Right! Unlike my father, I'm hard on myself. After three or four years of playing around like that, Marie-chan at my favorite pub told me, 'If you keep living like this, you'll end up growing a mustache like your father's.' That's when I realized my methods were wrong!"

"You realized that way too late."

"Regardless! I can't let my father get away with this! And that's where you come in!"

"...Where I come in?"

Neard nodded grandly. "Yes! I'm trying to figure out what to do!"

"SO YOU HAVEN'T ACTUALLY THOUGHT OF ANYTHING?!"

"No! It's not that I haven't thought, it's just that I haven't come up with anything! Even if the result is the same, I've put in the effort, and I want to value that process! Anyway, I've heard of your name before. —So, I thought I'd pull you over to my side and have you lend me your wisdom before that old man wins you over!"

"...I see. But if that's the case, shouldn't you just report the smuggling to the Council Chairman of the Association and have them handle it...?"

"I considered that, obviously. ...But... personally, I'd prefer a plan where I can keep the 'sweetness' of taking the treasure for myself while making my father taste a total, humiliating defeat!"

"THERE IS NO SUCH CONVENIENT PLAN!"

Whack!

I knocked Neard flat with a cold steak plate. I stood up, grabbed him by the collar, and barked:

"Listen up! Right now, your father's organization might just be a local problem around Tiagias! But what if his research gets results and he's evaluated highly? What if other Sorcerers' Associations get involved?! The wonderful, traditional culture of sneaking into ruins, scolding reckless Orcs and Goblins, blowing up mindless Golems and Living Armors with attack spells to blow off steam, and then helping ourselves to treasure—that ancient tradition will be wiped out!"

"...Is... is that really a 'traditional culture'? Do you always do that sort of thing?" Neard backed away slightly at my words.

"Ignore me for a second! We can't let someone who fills their own pockets under the guise of 'research' get away with it! If it comes to that, the only option is total annihilation!"

"...A-Annihilation? Uh... sorry, I'm suddenly having a strong urge to ask someone else for help..."

"Heh heh heh. What are you talking about now? Do you really think you can back out after consulting me? Now that it’s come to this, that old man is going to see the sunset of his ruin! You better be ready for some collateral damage too! ...Oh, by the way, about my fee—how much are we talking?"

"Uwaaaaaagh! I definitely asked the wrong person!" Neard continued to wail, clutching his head, as I began to negotiate the commission.

Tiagias City—it was a bustling post town that had flourished as a transport hub where five major highways crossed. A small Sorcerers' Association stood quietly in a corner of that town.

"...So, Master Syd is doing that, you say? ...Even hearing it, I find it hard to believe..."

In the Council Chairman's room at the Association, we had first paid a visit to the Chairman to tell him about Syd’s information-suppression and smuggling. After hearing the story, the balding Chairman spoke with a troubled face.

"You mean you don't believe me?!" Neard shouted.

"...No, it’s not that. But I can't just say 'Oh, so Syd was doing that? You're fired' based on a story alone, can I?"

"I'd be perfectly okay with that," I offered.

"No, even if it's okay with you, it’s bad for the Association's reputation."

"—True, at this point, it is just a story. We have no evidence," I interjected. "I understand that you hold Master Syd in high regard, Chairman. But if what Neard says is true, this is a grave matter. Overlooking this wouldn't just be about Syd’s personal morals or the Tiagias Association—it would affect the prestige of the entire Sorcerers' Association."

"Ugh..." The Chairman groaned.

—In other words, I was subtly declaring: *"I know you don't want to make waves because Syd gives the Association nice donations. But if you're going to overlook this,*

I'll snitch to the other Associations."

If an organization officially claiming to uncover historical truth was actually burying facts, it would be a massive scandal. If it leaked from elsewhere, the Chairman would be held responsible. However, if the Chairman himself helped expose it, his reputation would actually improve.

"...W-Well... if it's true... it is a problem..." the Chairman muttered, looking away.

Translated: *"Syd is quite profitable for me, so I'd like to protect him if possible, but my seat as Chairman is more important."*

Good. The groundwork was laid.

"Then all we need is evidence! Since that's decided, let's start the investigation immediately! Let's go, Neard!"

"Yeah!"

And so, the investigation began!

As the city began to glow with the colors of sunset, a single horse-drawn carriage slipped quietly out of the back entrance of a large mansion. The cargo bed was covered with a cloth, and the driver, wrapped in a threadbare cloak that looked like a rag, pulled his hood low to hide his face.

"...There it is! That's the one!" Neard whispered from the shadows.

We were behind Syd’s mansion in the center of Tiagias City. "My father always goes out like that to dispose of the 'unnecessary' treasures himself."

"Himself?" Looking again, I could see an unnecessarily grand mustache poking out from under the driver's hood.

—Since Syd’s group had appeared at the ruins yesterday, it was likely that the disposal of the treasure would happen around today. We had been watching the mansion, and we’d hit the jackpot immediately. If we caught him in the act and turned over the buyer and the goods to the Chairman, it would be case closed. Syd would be stripped of his excavation rights.

"Follow him!" I nodded, and we began tailing the carriage.

Likely for camouflage, only a single, tired-looking old horse was pulling the cart. From its appearance, no one would suspect it was carrying anything of value. Because of its slow pace, we could easily keep up by walking quickly. We moved through the twilight city, following the carriage at a distance. Children returning home. Lantern light leaking from windows.

Eventually, as the sky turned a deep indigo, the carriage reached the outskirts of the city.

—Is he leaving town? Neard and I looked at each other. We had assumed the deal would go down inside the city. But the carriage continued out of town, rattling along a small, unpaved road. At this hour, there was no one else around.

...Hmm... I see...

Rattle.

Abruptly, the carriage stopped a short distance further on. Only the sound of insects dominated the night air. We held our breath in the shadows of the bushes.

And then...

"...Heh... hehehehe..." A small chuckle drifted on the wind, and the driver slowly stood up. "I knew it. I knew you two were tailing me."

The driver spoke with Syd’s voice.

—I thought so. When someone is making a deal they can't go public with, their guilt usually shows, making them nervous and shifty. But this driver—Syd—hadn't even looked around once. It was as if he were declaring, *"I'm not even considering the possibility of being followed."*

Which meant it was a trap to lure us out. It was the only logical conclusion.

"...W-What?! Hey, what do we do? He says he noticed us! Hey!" Neard whispered in a total panic.

...Wow. He hadn't considered the possibility of a trap at all, had he?

Syd threw off his cloak and hood. "I said I knew! Now! Show yourselves!" he declared

loudly.

Fine! No choice now!

Zip! We pushed through the bushes and stepped out onto the road.

"So you noticed us tailing you! Father!"

"Hmph. Don't underestimate me. Did you think I was a father who couldn't read your simple thoughts?! Listen, Neard! The world isn't built so that everything can be solved by being pure and honest like you think it is!"

"I'm not listening!"

"I thought as much! That's why! This time, I'll give you a thorough lesson! A lesson in reality! Wake up! **Golems**!"

Creak... groan...

The carriage groaned in response to Syd's call. The cloth-covered bed moved—

Neigh!

The terrified horse whinnied and bolted, pulling the cart with it!

"Waaaaagh?! Wait, don't run! Don't leave! Sorry for scaring you!" Syd shouted as the carriage sped off into the night with whatever was moving in the back still on it.

.....

"...Uh..."

"...Hey... tell me! What should I do?! In this kind of situation?!"

"...Don't ask me, I don't know... well, let's just wait a bit."

We waited blankly for a while. The moon moved slightly, and the mosquitoes were getting annoying when—

"—Oh. He's back."

Syd finally returned down the night road, his heavy footsteps accompanied by a single, massive shadow. It was nearly twice the height of a normal person. Even in the

moonlight, you could tell it was made of stone. As Syd had said, it was a stone doll.

...Looks like the horse got away, though.

Syd and the Golem stopped in front of us. "*Pant*... *pant*... Behold! My... Golem!"

Gasping for breath, he pointed grandly at the Golem behind him. We looked at the Golem obediently. —Followed by a long silence.

Syd looked at us, somewhat dissatisfied. "...Your reaction is a bit lacking... you two..."

"...Well... it's a bit hard to expect a reaction at this point..." I said, scratching my cheek.

Syd looked furious. "Ngggh! Then listen and be amazed! This Golem was created using a lost, super-ancient technology that I have researched!"

"—What?!"

"Hah! Are you surprised now?!"

"...Well... you told me to be 'amazed,' so I'm giving you a courtesy 'surprised' face."

"Ngh... such a blunt opinion... but fine, it's better than no reaction..."

"That's all well and good, but you aren't going to give us some cliché punchline like, 'Because it was made with ancient technology, its performance is actually worse than modern ones,' are you?"

.....

At my point, Syd froze for a moment.

"...W-Well... anyway, let's set the Golem talk aside for now..."

"—Wait just a minute! I hit the bullseye, didn't I, old man?!"

"It can't be helped! If I knew how to make a high-performance Golem, I wouldn't have brought this piece of junk out! I finally wrapped its poor performance in cool-sounding dialogue, and you just ruined it! Why you—I won't forgive you! ...Is what I'd like to say, but there's no way I can win in a straight fight against Lina Inverse, so Neard!"

"Eh? Me?"

Neard, who had been staring blankly, was suddenly pulled back to reality by his father's pivot.

"Yes! You! You're the reason this woman is involved, because you didn't like the way your father does things! Therefore! You should fight yourself, without borrowing the strength of others! Isn't that how a true settlement should be reached?!"

"...Tch... true...!"

No. He's definitely being tricked.

"Then! Try and win against this Golem I created!"

"Right!"

See? Definitely tricked. I didn't bother pointing it out, though.

"If you win, I'll admit defeat! But if the Golem wins, you will accept my methods, follow in my footsteps, and grow a magnificent mustache! Understood?!"

"...Tch...! I have my back against the wall...!"

...Well, being forced to grow that mustache *is* a pretty desperate situation.

"Then—here I come!"

With a shout, Neard faced off against the Golem!

The insects stopped chirping. The night wind blew.

Zip! Neard kicked the grass and moved first! He chanted a spell—

"**Vibration Bullet!**"

BOOOOM!

...Rumble...

"Wow. That was fast."

I couldn't help but comment as the Golem fell over instantly.

"...Hmm... it was more fragile than I thought..." Syd stood there, sweating.

Neard turned to Syd gleefully. "I won! Father! A promise is a promise!"

Sigh. Syd let out a deep breath. "...Fine... a promise is a promise... I lost. I admit it."

He said it surprisingly gracefully.

"—So, about the excavation rights—"

Syd looked at me as I asked, and said coolly: "Oh. That and this are separate."

Snap!

Both Neard and I froze at his blunt refusal.

"Wait...! Wait a minute, Father! If I won this match...!"

"I said I'd admit defeat, didn't I? And I did. Honestly. That's all. I never said a word about the ruins from the start."

...Why, you...! This old man is slick!

"—Oh, and by the way, Lady Lina." Syd suddenly looked at me. "If you let your anger get the better of you and blast me with a spell here, I'll report it to the Association as an unprovoked assault."

"Ngh...!" Hearing that, I had no choice but to cancel the **Dragon Slave** I'd started chanting.

"Well then, I think it's time I returned to the mansion. You two should head back soon, too. Hah hah hah hah!"

Neard and I could only gnash our teeth as we watched Syd's retreating back as he laughed.

...Why, you...! You got us this time, but next time, I'll absolutely crush your ambition to monopolize ruins research!

Standing in the night wind, I made that firm vow to myself!

(For Whom the Sleeping Treasure Lies: To be continued!)

Next Episode Preview

Syd burns with the ambition to monopolize all ruins research! Sensing that Lina and Neard are a threat, Syd's faction finally makes its big move! Will Lina and her friends be able to put a stop to Syd's grand designs?! Or will they be defeated and forced to grow weird facial hair?! Next time: *"Hello, Mustache"*... ...Wait, no, it's: **"For Whom the Sleeping Treasure Lies (Part 2)."** Keep your eyes peeled!

The Story So Far

Syd, a member of the Sorcerers' Association, claims to work for the noble cause of historical enlightenment, but in reality, he aims to monopolize the rights to all ruins research! His own son, Neard—driven by "justice" or something like it—seeks to crush that ambition. Lina has accepted Neard's request and begun her move to find proof of Syd's misdeeds. Their first confrontation, however, ended with Syd slipping away in a cloud of smoke, leaving nothing resolved. Will Lina and the others finally grasp the evidence of his crimes?!

For Whom the Sleeping Treasure Lies (Part 2)

To put it bluntly... things had hit a dead end.

"Alright, let's head out!" "It's useless." That day, after finishing an early dinner, I answered Neard's enthusiastic shout with total bluntness.

".....Uh..." Stunned by my flat refusal, he fell silent for a moment. "Useless? Why?!" "I mean... 'why'? Just think about it for a second." "What?! If I 'just think about it' and say 'Oh, okay,' and I *still* don't get it, my position and my pride will be in tatters! That's why! I'm going to choose not to think and just ask! Why?!"

"Ugh... when you're that honest, I guess I have to explain. Basically, it's this: Last night, Syd predicted we were following him. He canceled the actual deal and chose to pick a fight with us instead." I leaned over the table, which was now covered in empty plates, and lowered my voice. We were in a small eatery slightly off the main path of Tiagias City. It was entirely possible that one of the other customers was an associate of Syd's. Naturally, we couldn't hold a strategy meeting at full volume.

"I didn't need you to tell me that part..." "But do you know what it *means*? The answer is that Syd is now wary of us. In yesterday's fight, Syd lost the battle itself, but we still haven't caught him by the tail. After yesterday, Syd surely realized that he can't win in a straight-up fight. So, there's only one move left for him: stay still and wait. That's the hardest way for him to slip up. That's why tonight, even if we watched his manor all night long, nothing would happen." I paused to order an extra juice from a passing waitress.

"But... couldn't he try to outsmart us by doing the opposite?" Neard asked, looking dead serious. "As a possibility, sure. But look at Syd's personality and the situation. He's cautious enough to pick a 'fight he won't lose' just by predicting our moves. And right now, he's not hurting for money. Do you really think he'd do a deal with the mindset of 'I can probably outsmart them, but there's a chance they'll catch me'? Not a chance. At most, he'll send out fake carriages day after day to run us ragged and wear us down. If he turns this into a war of attrition, either you'll run out of money or I'll get tired of traveling... he's betting on one of us giving up first."

"That’s...! That’s bad!" "It is bad. That’s why I'm in a bad mood." "Really? You looked incredibly happy while you were eating dinner..." "What are you talking about?! All those meats and vegetables! We eat things that were once alive to carry on the torch of life! If you eat with a grumpy face, you're asking for divine punishment! ...Though, if I’m being picky, the chicken sauté could have used less salt and more pepper..." "Ignoring the food for a second... this really is quite bad." Neard looked grave. "Out of spite because the old man got away yesterday, I spent all day drinking at a place with pretty girls, and for some reason, my funds have suddenly run dry..."

"YOU IDIOOOOOOT!"

WHACK! I snatched a tray from a passing waitress and smacked Neard upside the head.

"A-Ah! Excuse me! Customer?!" I handed the tray back to the flustered waitress without a word and continued. "In this situation, why on earth were you doing that?!" "Well... I suddenly remembered it had been a while since I'd seen Chris-chan at Giorno's place..." "THAT'S NOT A REASON!" "Think of it as 'The Warrior's Rest'..." "Don't rest until the problem is solved! Rest *after* the battle is over! Honestly... are you even serious about this?!"

"O-Of course I am! As a man who relies on his 'aura of justice' to be popular with the pub girls, I absolutely cannot overlook my father's evil deeds!" ...Cheap justice. Or rather, is that even justice? Still, Syd’s ambition had to be stopped. If I pointed out that the girls were just giving him a "business smile" and he got discouraged enough to cancel the request, I’d be the one in trouble. ...Then again, if he says he can't pay me after the job is done because he ran out of money, that’s also a problem... *Sigh*.

"Anyway... the fact remains that we can't take our time. We have to attack from a different angle. Do you have any idea who Syd was dealing with?" "None at all." Ugh, you're useless! He shook his head so casually I nearly facepalmed. But I couldn't give up now. "Fine. Since tonight is a bust, starting tomorrow, we’re hitting every art dealer and magic item shop in this city to gather info."

"Wait, wait!" "What?" "How do you know the old man's business partner is even in this city?" "Because eight or nine times out of ten, they are." "How can you be so sure?" "The deals are always in the evening or at night. Syd leaves directly in a carriage—that’s what you said, right?" "Yeah, but..." "Then the deal is in the city. Timewise, it *could* be someone from another town meeting outside the gates, but I doubt he’d go wandering out onto the night roads with a carriage full of treasure. If

bandits found him, he’d be jumped for sure." "I see..." Neard nodded slightly. "Got it. Then good luck starting tomorrow!" "Why are you acting like it’s someone else's problem? You’re coming with me." ".....WHAAAT?! Why?!" "It's obvious. You've seen some of the treasures Syd excavated, haven't you? We need you to identify them. There’s no other way." "Wait, hold on! Then when...?" He looked genuinely distressed. "When am I supposed to go to the pub with the pretty girls?!" "DON'T GO UNTIL THE WORK IS DONE!" My scream echoed through the shop.

And so, Neard and I began our investigation of the art dealers! And on the first day, we struck out completely!

"Well... I didn't think we'd find a clue so easily on the first day, but still..." The sun had set on our battle. We were having dinner at an eatery near the inn, calling it a day for the investigation. Between bites of pasta with garlic, celery, red pepper, and mayonnaise sauce, I spoke in a tired tone. "This city... it has quite a lot of art dealers..." Being at the crossroads of five major highways, it felt like a post town, but looking closer, there were plenty of luxury shops. We went through them one by one—Neard browsing the goods while I subtly fished for info.

For example: I’d pick up an expensive-looking item, look at it closely, and say: *'This isn't bad, but I'm getting a bit bored of just "luxurious" lately... do you have anything... unique? A real find?'* The shopkeeper, sensing a big sale, would then gleefully bring out weird or grotesque items from the back. It was unlikely a shop dealing with Syd would put stolen goods in the front window, so acting like a wealthy eccentric looking for rarities was the best bet. Naturally, I wasn't in my usual sorcerer gear—I was wearing a high-quality dress I’d made Neard buy as a "necessary expense."

But in the end—nothing. I was shown a mountain of suspicious items, like a bisque doll whose hair grew or a "sleeping pillow" that guaranteed misfortune, but Neard didn't recognize a single one of them as his father's finds. Besides, if a wary Syd had warned his business partners about us, we could do this for weeks and find nothing. "Nnnngh..." Just as I let out a groan of frustration...

"HO-HO-HO-HO! I found you, Lina Inverse!" The door burst open, and in walked the woman with long black hair, a black cloak, and a costume that practically screamed "Evil Sorceress"—my self-proclaimed rival, Naga the Serpent! I stood up from my chair and walked over. "Oh, good timing, Naga! Come on, sit down, sit down!" I took Naga by the hand and pulled her over to our table.

"Huh...? Eh...?" Confused by my unusually warm welcome, she allowed herself to be led to the table, lured in by the spread of food. "Hey, what are you doing with... this person?" "Who are you calling 'this person'?!" Naga snapped for a second, but I ignored her. "Isn't it obvious? Doing this the normal way is going to take too long. I'm going to win her over and have her blast Syd with attack spells until he says 'I'm sorry.' That way, no matter how much trouble it causes later, the responsibility is all Naga's! Even if she says our names, people will believe us over her just based on the way we look!" "Oh! I see!" It wasn't even justice anymore—it was basically terrorism—but for the sake of stopping Syd, a few sacrifices had to be made!

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! I'm sorry to disappoint you, Lina, but it won't be that easy!" Naga's eyes were glued to the food on the table, but she still managed a grand proclamation. "After all, I've come here on an errand for that very same Mr. Syd!" "What?!" Neard stood up, flustered. "...Let me guess. You got involved with a weirdo for some stupid reason again." "Stupid?! How rude! You could even call this a fated encounter! A while ago, I got lost in the mountains, fell into a hole, and ended up in what looked like some ruins. To recover my strength and hide from the cold, I climbed into a coffin-like thing to sleep. When I woke up, I had been carried into the basement of Syd's house!" "Whoa." Neard gasped. ...Hmm. I hadn't seen Naga for a while... to think she'd been excavated by Syd...

"But wait... when you climbed out of that coffin... didn't Syd freak out...?" "Hah! He collapsed and didn't get up for a while! I thought I might have actually killed him, so I panicked and called the household staff! It seems Mr. Syd figured out my situation without me even explaining, because he didn't ask a single question!" ...Isn't it more likely the shock of seeing her erased his memory of the encounter, and he just thinks she's 'the person who helped me when I collapsed'...?

"Wait... about ten days ago, while I was bar-hopping... I heard a rumor that the old man suddenly collapsed and was bedridden..." Neard muttered, sweating. "Anyway!" Naga pointed a finger sharply at us. "I know you visited a place called the Preston Company today! They complained to Mr. Syd, and I've been sent to stop you! Well?! Do you understand?!" "Whoa, she just blurted out everything!" Neard cried. Yes. This is Naga's most terrifying trait. She will proudly state things that shouldn't be said, simply because no one told her *not* to. The moment you make Naga an ally without knowing her quirks, you've already lost.

"Heh... I understand perfectly. Basically, you're here to stop us by force, right?!" "Exactly!" "Then let's have dinner first! Hey, Ma'am! An extra order of local chicken cream stew over here!" "Hah! Then I'll have the coarse-ground sausage and vegetable

pot-au-feu!" Lured by my lead, Naga placed her order. ...Naturally, after finishing her meal and being completely full, Naga forgot her original purpose and went home.

"I won't be tricked this time, Lina Inverse!" A while later, Naga burst back into the shop. But this time, she wasn't alone. Following behind her was a crowd of men and women in strange robes—about a dozen of them!

"You guys?!" Neard stood up. The robes they were wearing were identical to the ones worn by the people around Syd at the ruins. Yes, they were Syd's sycophants. As expected, Syd himself was nowhere to be seen. I could imagine what happened. Syd had sent his cronies along with Naga to make sure she didn't forget her goal again. Naga puffed out her chest in front of them. "Ho-ho-ho-ho! These people behind me are Mr. Syd's assistants! In other words! If I ever look like I'm going to forget my goal again, they're here to remind me! What do you think of that?!" "...I mean, boasting about a situation that sounds like a toddler's first errand is just..."

"I hear you've been making false accusations against Master Syd!" one of the followers said angrily. "Master Neard! We kept quiet until now because you're his son... but if you're going to hire a suspicious drifter like this, we can't stay silent!" added an older man. "If you don't realize how much Master Syd is suffering... then I suppose we'll have to teach you a lesson. We're all somewhat skilled in magic ourselves. We won't lose to common thugs." Hostility filled the room at the third man's words.

"Hoh. This is getting interesting." I stood up from my seat. "A lesson, huh...? Let's see you try! Neard!" "Yeah!" "We're running!" ..... "Wait, what?" By the time Neard let out that dumbfounded cry, I had already grabbed his hand and was sprinting toward the back of the shop—the kitchen. "Wait... what are you...?" "It's a plan. Leave it to me," I told the confused Neard. Naga and the followers finally snapped out of it and gave chase. "Hey, customers?!" "Put the bill on Neard's tab!" "Got it!" "WHA—?!" Apparently, the staff knew Neard's face and nodded easily. Neard looked visibly disgusted. "Um..." "Talk later!" I cut him off and burst out the back of the shop. Naturally, I had no intention of ever bringing up the bill again. We sprinted through the night alleys.

"There they are! Over there!" Following a man's voice came... "**Freeze Arrow!**" Naga's voice. Killing intent and cold air closed in from behind. "This way!" I turned right into an alley. Looking over my shoulder, I saw Naga's ice bolts zip past Neard, who was keeping up perfectly. "Neard! Counter-attack! But don't use anything too flashy!" As

we sprinted, I chanted a spell under my breath. A presence appeared above us. It seemed someone had gone over the roofs to get ahead. A man stood on a second-story roof, readying a spell. "**Exploding Smoke Dance!**" It was a spell that fired multiple small fireballs. They're hot, but they don't have much killing power. Right then— "**Demonic Wind!**" I unleashed the powerful wind spell I'd been chanting. The wind blew the swarm of fireballs right back at the caster! *Pop-pop-pop-pop-BOOM!* A series of small explosions lit up the night sky for a moment. The man slid off the roof and hit the ground with a thud. Behind us, Neard fired at the followers. "**Freeze Arrow!**" *Clang-clang-clang!* "Aaaaagh!" Multiple screams rang out. "Hey, Neard! Don't overdo it!" "But what should we do?! If we just keep running..." "Leave it to me!" We burst out onto the main street. At this hour, there was hardly anyone around. We sprinted through the empty street, with Naga and the followers trailing slightly behind. We dodged and blocked the occasional attack spell from behind.

"I see!" Neard finally realized my goal. "Exactly!" We ducked off the main road into a narrow alley again. I chanted— "**Vibration Bullet!**"

CRAAAASH! The spell smashed a huge hole in the wall of a nearby building. Neard and I jumped through. Naga and the rest followed close behind. "Ho-ho-ho-ho! It seems you've finally given up, Lina Inverse! Jumping into a place like this yourself!" Naga's triumphant boast was cut short by... "W-What?!" multiple gasps of shock.

BAM! The door flew open. "What is it?!" Syd stood up from his desk, half by reflex. This was Syd's house in the center of the city. Entering through the large oak doors were Neard and I. Behind us—Naga and the followers. "W-What is the meaning of this...?" "Master!" One of the followers spoke to the flustered Syd. "Is it true?! The rumor that you're selling off excavated items on the side?!" "What are you saying? I don't know what Neard or that woman told you... but why would you believe such a thing?" He spoke calmly, as if lecturing them. But the suspicion didn't fade from their eyes.

"Actually..." I pointed to Naga and the followers. "While we were being chased by these people, we accidentally smashed a hole in a wall and burst inside. And for some reason... the people behind me recognized a whole bunch of items lined up in there. Why do you think that is? Oh, and by the way, that building was a warehouse for the Preston Company art dealers." "Wha—?!" Now it was Syd's turn to be shocked. Based on their behavior and the situation, I'd guessed the followers didn't know about Syd's side-business. So I decided to make the followers themselves the witnesses. I knew if I sent Naga back, Syd would surely send his "supervisors"—the followers—along with her. And he wouldn't come himself. If he did, he risked being blasted by me or Neard in

the chaos. If he didn't, he could claim the followers had acted on their own if things went south. So I led them to the back of the Preston Company, smashed open the warehouse wall, and brought everyone inside. If Syd had been with them, he would have realized my plan and stopped the chase halfway through. Seeing the items they had helped excavate sitting in a private warehouse, the followers finally understood what was going on.

"How... how did you know about that place...?" Syd groaned. He couldn't have imagined Naga had blurted it out so proudly. I frowned theatrically. "'How did I know'? I wonder what *that* could mean?" "Master Syd! No, Syd! You really were...!" one of the followers cried. "You were lying to us! Everything you said about our ideals was a lie!" Another followed. Their anger and disappointment were proportional to the trust they'd once had in him. Neard stepped forward. "This is the end... Father!" "Tch... how arrogant!" Syd pointed a sharp finger at Neard. "If you're going to say that, then prove it! Prove right now that I've been defeated—that you have surpassed me!" "I'll do it!" Neard readied himself. "If you win, I'll admit my crimes! But if I win, you will hold your tongues and come back to me quietly! Understood?!" "Fine!" Neard had been tricked again. Syd said "hold your tongues about the smuggling," but Neard didn't even notice. "Then here I come, Neard!" "Yeah!" The two faced off and chanted. "**Wind Fang Slash!**" Neard struck first! It was a spell that cut with invisible blades of wind. It wasn't very lethal, but it could cut skin. It was the perfect spell to break an opponent's spirit. Syd read their trajectory and dodged. But— "Ngh!" He didn't dodge completely. His long left mustache was sliced off and fell to the floor. "I went easy on you!" Neard proclaimed. "Surrender if you don't want to get hurt!" "Don't make me laugh, Neard!" Syd grinned. "Now I will show you! The ancient magic I revived through my research! **Chaos Beard!**"

The moment Syd unleashed the "Power Word," his severed left mustache began to grow at an incredible rate! He'd predicted it would be cut and chanted a growth spell beforehand?! ...No, that's impossible. The mustache quickly returned to its original length—and then kept growing! Longer and longer! Not just the left, but the right one too! "What?!" Neard gasped. The mustache grew until it reached the ceiling. "Hah!" Syd snapped his head. The two mustaches split into a dozen whips and lashed out at Neard! Neard scrambled to dodge, but the whip-mustaches attacked relentlessly! "Fu-ha-ha-ha! Are you scared?!" Syd's laughter filled the room. "...Don't get cocky! **Exploding Smoke Dance!**" Neard's attack blossomed into countless small flowers of flame. All were blocked by the mustache-whips. But! "Whoa?!" Syd cried out in shock. The flames were setting the mustaches on fire! "Aaaaagh!" Syd struggled as his mustaches burned. *BAM!* Syd, now mustache-less, burst through the flames and

lunged at Neard! Had he used the fire and the mustaches as a distraction?! Before Neard could even cry out... *THUD!* Syd's fist caught Neard right in the face.

"The match... is decided." Syd declared victory in a quiet tone once Neard finally managed to sit up. "...D-Dammit...!" Neard sat there, looking away and spitting out the words. Syd looked down at him arrogantly. "Keep your promise. Forget all about the smuggling, tell no one, and come back to me." "Wha—?!" Neard looked up, but Syd just smiled. "I said 'hold your tongues and come back.' You all heard it, didn't you?" I nodded silently. "To 'hold your tongue' means not to speak of the smuggling. And you agreed." "NOOO! I wasn't listening carefully!" Neard shouted, clutching his head. "And you two have no complaints either, I assume?" Syd looked at us. "A promise is a promise. You will keep it." "I know..." I nodded. "But Neard made the promise. *We* didn't promise anything." ..... "DAMMIT ALL!" Now Syd was the one clutching his head next to Neard. ...Yeah, they're definitely father and son. Syd suddenly stood up and pointed at us. "Then I have no choice! You two! Fight me—" **"LIKE WE WOULD!"** *CRUNCH!* With a synchronized shout, everyone's kicks landed squarely on Syd at once.

And so, Syd's ambition to monopolize ruins research was crushed. Since his actions weren't technically illegal in a criminal sense, he wasn't thrown in jail, but his research team was disbanded. It was unlikely he'd ever be able to stand in the spotlight again. "Thanks for everything." The case was over and the fee had been paid. "Now my old man will hopefully walk the right path." Neard bowed his head. ...By the way, Naga, after finding out she wouldn't get any reward from Syd, had been drinking since noon and was now sulking in her room at the inn. "Anyway... I have one last thing to ask..." he said, looking serious. "Hmm?" "What happened to the old man... it was his own fault. For the sake of justice, it couldn't be helped. But... from now on... since the old man's income is gone and I can't sponge off him anymore... where and how am I supposed to get the money to keep going to pubs with pretty girls...?" "HOW SHOULD I KNOW?! YOU WALK THE RIGHT PATH TOO!" My scream echoed through the streets of Tiagias.

(For Whom the Sleeping Treasure Lies: End)

Scramble Grill (Part 1)

A savory aroma began to drift through the breeze. "...Heh... hehehe..." At the thought of the bliss soon to come, my heart pounded and my cheeks flushed. Bliss—otherwise known as dinner!

It was a peaceful, sun-drenched afternoon. I was by a riverside along the road, grilling some fish I'd caught for lunch. I'd packed the fins with salt, skewered them, and set them up around the campfire. It's simple, sure, but there's a flavor here you just don't get with restaurant fish—or fish roasted on a rock heated by an attack spell. It's practically irresistible.

The riverside was tucked away from the main road. No bustling crowds here. Just the chirping of small birds from the forest across the water, the gentle murmur of the stream, and the wind passing by. Since I wasn't in any particular hurry, moments like this were precious.

"Are they grilled yet? ♪ Are they grilled yet? ♪" Humming some nonsensical little tune while waiting for the food to finish is its own kind of fun.

Then, it happened. A sense of wrongness washed over the area. It stopped. The birdsong. And then—

BOOM!

An explosion erupted from the forest right in front of me. I reflexively hovered halfway out of my seat. That was—an attack spell?! And close, too! Having assessed that much, I immediately sat back down and went back to waiting for my fish to finish.

Don't call it indifference. If I went to go check it out now, these fish would undoubtedly turn into charcoal. Dining—taking the life of another and eating it to sustain your own—that is the very providence of nature! The act of passing on life

itself! If I were to let these fish burn to a crisp, their lives would be wasted! That would be a profanation against life—a fatal rebellion against the laws of nature! ...Plus, I just didn't feel like getting involved in trouble.

"Are they grilled yet? ♪ Are they gri—"

KABOOM!

Another roar cut off my song. ......Huh..... Somehow... that sound seemed a tiny bit closer than the last one...? With a sinking feeling in my chest, I looked up just a fraction.

Splash. The sound of water echoed. Bursting out of the forest and splashing through the river was a middle-aged guy, sprinting for his life. .....Wait... Could this be...? In the moment I froze, our eyes met! D-Dammit!

"Sorcerer! Please, help me!" Exactly as expected, the guy shouted at me. Granted, I was wearing a black cloak and gemstone talismans—the unmistakable look of a sorcerer. And since there wasn't a soul else around, I couldn't exactly play the "I didn't think you were talking to me" card.

Could I just blast him with an attack spell and pretend I saw nothing?! No, wait! If I used a clumsy spell and splashed water everywhere, my precious grilled fish would be ruined! While I was debating this, the man crossed the river and reached my side. He looked to be in his forties, a rugged-looking guy with blonde hair. He was wearing a plain black robe and clutching a beat-up backpack like his life depended on it.

"Help me! I beg of you! I can't let them have this—" "—That's far enough! Grimwald!" A second voice rang out, and the man—Grimwald—stopped dead in his tracks. The voice came from the forest. Grimwald turned around fearfully, and there, emerging from the greenery, stood a dark silhouette.

He looked to be in his twenties. Silver hair, loose black clothes, and a mask covering the lower half of his face. He looked like the textbook definition of an assassin. "—How unsightly. Do you intend to drag an innocent bystander into this?" "I... I don't need to be lectured by the likes of you!" Grimwald blustered, though his legs were shaking like leaves.

"Then handle it yourself. It’s simple. Just hand over the contents of that pack. That’s all. If you do, no one has to be unhappy." "...As if! I don't know what you're plotting, but I'm sure you'll use it for something terrible! I won't let you! This belongs to that

person..."

Right then, killing intent flashed, cutting his words short! It didn't come from the assassin—it came from a nearby bush! A sphere of light appeared, hurtling toward us with the speed of the wind! "—Look out!" I shouted and made a huge leap, reaching out my hand! BUT!

KABOOM!

The sphere erupted into flames upon impact, scattering roaring fire and destruction everywhere! "...Ngh...!" I pushed myself up, letting out a groan of regret. One side draws attention with conversation, while the other launches an attack from a different location. A classic diversion. Because I was a split-second late in realizing it— —In the end—I couldn't save them—

"Well done," the silver-haired man said. The bush rustled, and another man appeared. His clothes were identical to the first, but he had red hair and looked a bit younger. The two of them began walking toward us—no, toward Grimwald, who lay motionless beside me.

"—I can't forgive this—" My mutter made them stop. "...Did you say something, girl?" the silver-haired one asked coldly. "I said: I can't forgive this." "Hoh... for the sake of a man you just met? Quite the sentimental story."

I slammed my foot down on the "corpse" of Grimwald lying next to me. "Forget this irrelevant lump of matter!" **"WHAT?!"** Ignoring their shock, I used my grilled fish skewer to point sharply at a specific spot: the place where my campfire had been just moments ago.

Until just now, my fish had been waiting there to be finished. But in that instant the attack spell was fired, the only one I managed to grab and save was a single, half-raw skewer. The other five were gone. They'd been reduced to cinders by that blast. What a... tragedy...

"My lunch was right there! To pulverize it with an attack spell is an act of a beast—no, it's an act inferior to a beast! I will never forgive you for this!"

"THAT'S what you're mad about?! Worry about the guy a little, even if it's just for show! Do you have no human decency?!" "SHUT UP! Anyone who treats my grilled fish so carelessly has no right to talk about 'decency'!" I snapped back at the silver-haired man's absurd complaint.

"...W-What should we do...?" the red-haired one stammered. Silver-hair gritted his teeth. "...Dammit... in that case... you say something to her too!" ...*You* say something? "U-Understood! ...Er... You're a stupid, big-nosed cheapskate!"

".....Wow. With insults like that, you wouldn't even win against a toddler." "W-What?!" The red-haired man's face turned pale at my deadpan look. "...H-How do you know?! Do you know that I got into a serious shouting match with the five-year-old neighbor, Kathy-chan, and secretly ended up in tears?!"

You actually lost? Seriously? The red-haired guy looked at his partner. "It's a disadvantage! We should retreat!" "I'm not retreating for a reason like that! Anyway, we just need to recover the item..." "I told you I wouldn't forgive you! **Fireball!**" "...Wha—?!"

BOOOM! Drowning out his scream, my blast scored a direct hit on the red-haired guy! "...Tch!" Silver-hair looked back and forth between me, the fallen Grimwald, and his partner. He clicked his tongue and leaped toward the red-haired guy. *As if I'll let you escape!*

"**Flame Arrow!**" I unleashed the spell. But Silver-hair pulled a weighted chain from his shirt and swung it like a windmill, swatting away every single flame bolt I sent his way. "No way...!" Before my eyes, he scooped up his partner, leaped high, and vanished into the brush.

For a second, I thought about chasing them down until they died, but there was no profit in it. They didn't look like they had money, and if I got hurt in a counterattack, it would be a total loss. I gave up the pursuit, and soon their presence faded into the distance.

Suddenly... "Whew, saved." Grimwald, who had been "dead" until a second ago, sat bolt upright! "Whoa, you're alive!" "Hahaha! Don't be so surprised, Sorcerer-dono. Playing dead is a vital life skill." Though he was a bit singed, he looked perfectly fine and quite cheerful. "A life skill? If your lifestyle requires you to master 'playing dead,' I think you've made some wrong choices..."

"More importantly! You saved me! You're stronger than I expected. ...Say, I actually have a small favor to ask..." "Hehehehehehe." I grabbed the man by the collar and yanked. "...Well, standing around is no way to talk. Why don't we go to a nearby village, and while you buy me a mountain of delicious food to make up for my ruined lunch, you can tell me the whole story?" "I... I understand, I understand!"

"Lina Inverse?! *The* Lina Inverse?!" At a restaurant in the nearby village, after finishing our introductions over a table packed with food, Grimwald cried out in shock. Well, my name is famous in a lot of ways. "I've heard the rumors about you. To meet you in person—as a fellow sorcerer—is truly a pleasure."

Fellow... sorcerer? "So you're one too?" I swallowed a shrimp in bell pepper mayonnaise sauce and asked. "Yes. Though my focus is primarily on the research of magical tools..." While people think sorcerers are just people who blow things up, there are actually a lot of researcher types like him. He leaned over the table and lowered his voice. "They attacked me because they're after something I created." "Hmm." "Wait... 'Hmm'?! This is the part where the tension builds, Miss Lina! Why are you just calmly eating shrimp?! You have to frown and ask 'Something?' or 'What is it?' or I can't keep the story going..."

"Then don't tell it." "......Eh?" "You said you had a request... but I'm not the type to go looking for trouble for fun." "O-Of course I'll pay! At least twenty gold coins! Depending on the situation... maybe even a hundred!" "A hundred?!" I almost shouted. Depending on the job, that was a huge sum. Still, it would be reckless to just accept. He said "depending on the situation," so I had to verify.

"Twenty or a hundred? That's a big gap. You aren't just making things up, are you?" "Just listen." Grimwald cleared his throat. "Do you know Procal City to the north?" "I've heard the name." "The eldest son of the Lord there, Lord Elias, has a great interest in magic. He is actually my sponsor." "I see."

"With his investment, I set up a lab in a small fishing village to the south. A while ago, I finally finished my research. I sent a letter to Lord Elias and set out for the city myself. And then, today..." "Those guys showed up," I finished for him. He nodded. "I don't know who they are. They must have been watching me for a while. They found out my research was done and attacked before it could reach Lord Elias's hands."

"Right. So, if I escort you safely to Procal City and hand it over, I might get a reward of about a hundred gold coins." "Exactly. Will you take the job?" I waved my spoon at him. "But that 'reward' is just a 'maybe,' right? So there's a chance it won't happen. I'd be protecting you from mysterious attackers and potentially risking my life... for only twenty gold coins?" "Ngh... Fine, twenty-five!" "Five more? That's a joke." "Thirty!" "Not even close." "F-Forty!" "One more push!" "Forty gold coins and one copper!" "That is literally 'one more push' in the worst way." "Guh... Fine! I'll cover all travel expenses and pay forty-three gold coins! Honestly, that's almost everything I have on me! But in addition—if we deliver it safely, I'll definitely get a reward... and I'll give you thirty

percent of it!" "I see. A success bonus. ...Well, that's not bad." "Then...!" "One more thing." "There's *more*?!" "I want to know. What exactly did you create?"

Grimwald's face went pale. "...That... I cannot say." "Why not?" He clutched his pack tightly. "There are too many people here. If they hear, they might attack just to get it..." "It's not going to be something incredibly boring, is it?" "How dare you! This has the potential to change the world!" "Yeah... most sorcerers say big things like that." "Are you... insulting me?!" I let out a sigh. "Look. It's much easier to protect something when I know what it is. If I don't know, the enemy could trick me into handing it over. If I knew that pack was the goal, I'd know to protect it. If I didn't, I might use the pack as a decoy while trying to save just you. That would be bad, wouldn't it?"

He thought about it for a while. "...F-Fine..." he whispered. He sat in the chair next to me and leaned in. "...But since you're hearing it, you *must* take the job. And needless to say, keep it a secret." I nodded. I was curious to see what this guy had made. "The base fee of forty-three coins up front, please." He opened his pack carefully. Inside were various junk items. He reached in and showed me one item, keeping it hidden from the rest of the room. ..... "...A grill?" "Shhh!" He shushed me frantically. "Keep your voice down! What if the other customers hear?!" I lowered my voice too. "...I mean... even if they heard, it doesn't seem like a big deal..." It looked exactly like a grill used for cooking fish.

"Naturally, it's no ordinary grill. If it were, I wouldn't be asking for a guard, and those masked men wouldn't be after it!" "Well... I guess... so what is it then?" "Listen closely. This grill... **doesn't produce smoke even when you cook fish!**" "Uh-huh. And?" He went silent. "And?" I asked again. He looked troubled. "...What else do you need...?" ..... We stared at each other in silence. "...Er... Does it turn the fish into solid gold or something?" "Don't be ridiculous. This is a proper fish grill. What you're describing wouldn't be a 'fish grill' at all." "Then... it grills fish, but it also fires a mysterious beam that can blow up a small town...?" "That wouldn't be a fish grill either!" "So it really is just a fish grill that doesn't smoke?" "Calling it 'just' is rude! Do you have any idea how much value this has?!" I thought for a second. "...About three copper coins?" "ARE YOU CRAZY?!" He shouted, then lowered his voice. "If this falls into the wrong hands, the world could be destroyed!" "No, it wouldn't," I said, waving my hand. "But those guys are after it! That's a fact!" "Maybe they made a mistake. Or maybe you're lying to me. But either way—if I get paid in advance, I don't care. Fine. I'll take the job!"

That night, a room in a small inn exploded. Before the other guests could even see what happened, two shadows dropped into the room through the hole in the wall. The

two assassins in black. "Search the place," Silver-hair said. "No need," my voice rang out. **"WHAT?!"** I emerged from behind the blown-open door, with Grimwald clutching his pack behind me. "Impossible! How did you...?" I shrugged. "Simple. I booked two rooms in his name, and then I booked two more rooms nearby under a fake name. If you're going to launch a night attack, check if the person is actually in the room first."

"Tch!" "But seriously," I said, testing them. "Why are you guys after a grill like that?" **"WH—?!"** Their reaction was even bigger than I expected. They were visibly shaken. "...You... Do you actually know about the 'grill'...?" Silver-hair asked. I decided to be honest. "He said it doesn't smoke when you grill fish." Suddenly, killing intent flared from him! "Now that you know—we cannot show mercy."

"Wait a second! Are you guys *actually* after it just for that?!" "See! I told you!" Grimwald cheered from behind me. "You don't need to know anything more!" Silver-hair readied his weighted chain. Beside him, Red-hair drew two knives. "Here we come!" Silver-hair threw his chain! Red-hair followed right behind it. A time-lag combo! But in this narrow room, dodging was easy. I shoved Grimwald back and chanted a spell. The chain smashed into the wall. Missed!

Red-hair lunged, but I had already drawn my short sword. I'm not bad with a blade, and it would buy me time to chant. He stepped into the hallway and seemed to be heading for us—but then he stopped, grabbed the chain, and yanked it hard! Silver-hair used that force to fly through the air, past his partner, and straight at me! *What a combo!* They caught me off guard. Just then! "It's too loud in the middle of the night!" A guy in the next room opened his door to complain—right in Silver-hair's path!

WHAM! Silver-hair slammed into the door and fell over with the neighbor. Thanks, random guy! "**Freeze Arrow!**" I unleashed my spell, but the two assassins ducked behind the open door. I had slowed down the bolts to act as a barrier. "Run for it!" I turned to Grimwald. But he was already gone! He'd run off on his own?! I sprinted downstairs after him. There could be other assassins outside.

"Y-You guys?!" I heard Grimwald's voice from outside. I burst through the door. There he was, surrounded by over ten figures. These guys were different—bulky men in full-head masks with holes for eyes. And among them was one person who stood out like a sore thumb! "Ho-ho-ho-ho! Now! Give up and hand over that grill! ...Wait, Lina?! Why are you here?!" It was none other than Naga the Serpent—the self-proclaimed rival with the spiked spaulders and the skull necklace. *Ugh*..... "Don't explain. I already get it." I moved to Grimwald's side. "Hmph! Then hand over the grill!" Just then, the two assassins ran out of the inn. They stopped and stared at Naga's group.

"Who are you?!" Wait... "Aren't you... partners...?" I asked. "Partners?" Silver-hair frowned. "I see!" Grimwald shouted. "It seems more than one group is after my great invention!"

"WHAAAAAT?!" My scream joined with the assassins' in perfect harmony. If he was right—it was a three-way battle over a fish grill!

(To be continued!)

Next Episode Preview

A third faction appears, aiming for the smokeless grill! But why on earth is a grill so popular?! Will the author actually be able to tie these plot threads together?! Or will the next episode shamelessly start a completely different story while saying, "Please pretend the last chapter never happened"?! Nobody knows what the future holds! At any rate, next time: **"Scramble Grill" (Part 2)**. Bundle up and wait for it!

Scramble Grill (Part 2)

The Story So Far

In the middle of her travels, Lina met the sorcerer Grimwald and two black-clad assassins who were stalking him! Grimwald had developed a certain magical tool and was on his way to deliver it to his patron, Elias—the eldest son of Lord Crivelle. That magical tool was... a grill that doesn't produce smoke when you cook fish! To seize this "no-comment-worthy" magical item, the two assassins reappear! But then! A third faction aiming for the grill—Naga the Serpent and her troupe of mysterious masked men—appears before Lina and the others!

"Wait a second, are you guys serious?!" The silver-haired assassin was the one who shouted in a panicked voice at Grimwald's words. He turned to Naga and her masked goons. "Why?! Why would you want something like *that*?!" For someone trying to steal it himself, he certainly had a high-and-mighty way of talking about it.

"...Who?" Naga murmured. I pointed at the two men in black. "Ah, Naga. Let me introduce you. These two unnamed individuals are after the grill, just like you." The moment I said that... *Murmur, murmur!* A wave of agitation ran through the masked men behind Naga.

"Hmph! I see!" Naga, however, remained unfazed. She stared down the silver-haired and red-haired duo. "It seems you too have recognized the infinite possibilities held by that grill!"

"I don't know about 'infinite'..." "What other possibilities could a smokeless grill even have?" The silver and red-haired duo whispered back and forth in a strangely deadpan tone. ...True. It's hard to see much potential beyond, you know, grilling things...

"Anyway, it doesn't change the fact that we're enemies after the same prize," I added. "......True." The silver-haired man turned back to Naga. "If you stand in the way of our mission, I'll simply identify you as an enemy and eliminate you!" "Hmph! The feeling is mutual!"

Naga and Silver-hair faced off! And then— "**Freeze Arrow!**" Naga's spell acted as the opening shot. "Hah! **Fireball!**" *KABOOM!* "Take this! **Dug Haut!**" "Not a chance! **Explosion Array!**"

Spells flew, blasts danced, and the roar of magic shook the night air. *Boom! Zap! Crash!* And so, with zero regard for disturbing the neighbors, the battle between Naga and the men in black began!

Well, I don't know how that fight ended. Needless to say—while both sides were busy losing sight of their actual goal during the brawl, I grabbed Grimwald and made a clean getaway.

"I've found you, Lina Inverse!" Naga's voice echoed through a lunchtime diner when we were only a day away from our destination, Procal City. Naga burst through the door, leading the charge. Behind her—outside the shop—were the masked men from before. "Hmph! Last time I fell for your trick and spent until dawn fighting a pointless battle,

but it won't go that way this time!"

They didn't realize until *dawn*? Both of them? That is indeed the height of pointlessness... From behind Naga, one of the masked men stepped forward. "...You don't want to make a scene, do you? Why don't we talk outside?" he said in a suspiciously forced low voice. ...Hmm...? I raised an eyebrow. "Heh. For someone planning to mug people, you're being surprisingly reasonable. Fine by me. I don't plan on wrecking this place either. But... we have a bit of a problem. As you can see, we're right in the middle of lunch."

"...Do it later." "You know what they say—an empty stomach makes for a bad negotiator. Why don't you guys have something to eat too? My treat."

The second I said that... *Shuffle, shuffle, clatter, clatter.* Naga and her masked troupe filed into the shop and took every available seat. Geez. Talk about simple-minded—they really are honest with their stomachs. Naga and the lead masked man sat at the table with me and Grimwald. Of course, the table was already crowded with the mountain of food I had ordered.

"Hmph. Well then, let's begin—" Naga eagerly pulled off her gloves, and the man hurriedly reached for his mask— He stopped dead. "Wait! This is a trap!"

Tch! He noticed! I figured they'd have to take off their masks to eat, but it looks like he caught on. Well, no choice then! "Run for it!" I kicked my chair back, stood up, grabbed Grimwald by the collar, and dashed for the back exit!

"C-Chase them! Get them!" The man's voice echoed behind us. We sprinted through the kitchen, ignoring the screams of the staff, and burst out of the back door into a narrow alley. "W-What is the meaning of this, Miss Lina?! A trap...?" "I just wanted to see what they looked like!" I shouted back. Just then, I felt a surge of killing intent from behind!

"**Freeze Arrow!**" At the sound of Naga's voice, I spun around and kicked a nearby trash can into the air! The trash scattered, catching the freezing bolts, turning into ice blocks, and thudding to the ground. Behind us, squeezed into the ridiculously narrow street, were Naga and the Masked Troupe.

BUT! Like moths to a flame! I chanted a spell, slammed my hand against the wall, and released the magic! "**Vice Freeze!**" Ice tendrils sprouted from my hand, crawling along the walls and floor. The moment they made contact—*K-Ching!* Naga and the masked men were frozen solid in an instant. ...Well, there were a lot of them.

"Frozen solid" mostly meant they were stuck up to their knees. But that was enough to stop them completely.

"Ho-ho-ho! How naive, Lina Inverse!" Naga's distinctive laugh rang out. "You didn't think this would actually stop us, did you? I'll just melt this ice!" Naga began chanting— "**Fireball!**"

Hey, wait— BOOM! The blast did exactly what Naga intended and melted the ice—and, naturally, scorched everything that *wasn't* covered in ice to a crisp. "...You still haven't learned the definition of 'self-destruction,' have you...?" I muttered as I looked at the twitching, blackened heap of people.

"M-Master Fisherman?!" Grimwald cried out in shock as we peeled off the men's masks. ...I knew it. These guys were using fake voices on top of the masks. That meant they were people whose identities could be revealed by their voices—in other words, acquaintances of Grimwald. I had tried to get the masks off for that very reason, and I hit the bullseye. A "Master Fisherman" is usually the head honcho of a fishing village. Come to think of it, I heard Grimwald's lab was in a fishing village...

"So, you guys are from his village?!" "...I guess the cat's out of the bag," the Master Fisherman muttered. He was a man in his late twenties with a dark, rugged complexion. By the way, everyone—including Naga—was currently tied up like bundles of firewood so they couldn't move.

"Why... why would you do this?!" Grimwald asked. The Master Fisherman looked off into the distance. "...We found out. We found out that what you were researching was a grill that doesn't smoke when you cook fish. When we heard that, honestly, I thought the world was turning upside down."

"The world? That's a bit of an exaggeration..." I muttered. The Master Fisherman shot me a glare. "What do you know?! Do you have any idea how smoky it gets when you grill fish inside on a rainy day?! The wife is in tears, the kids are coughing—it's a literal living hell! Plus, the soot is so bad it never comes off during spring cleaning! Do you realize how revolutionary a smokeless grill is?! That 'super item' is exactly what we've been waiting for! We needed that grill to save the village! With that, everyone could live happily!"

"...Then why didn't you just explain the situation and offer to buy it?" "." The Master Fisherman went silent at my logic. "...W-Well... you see... I thought maybe we could steal the grill, make a bunch of copies, sell them, and make a killing..." "Thought so. But you say you'd make copies—is that even possible?" "We have a blacksmith in the

village. As for the magic side, we were... planning to have Naga-sensei here handle it." He looked over at Naga, who was tied up like a cocoon and gagged.

"If it's a smokeless fish grill, we could sell them for ten copper coins... no! Maybe even one silver coin! They'd sell like hotcakes!" "Huh?" Grimwald's voice was full of pure mockery. "What are you saying, Master? That may look like a normal grill at first glance, but it is actually the culmination of magical technology! To suggest it's worth ten coppers or a silver... please, stop with the tasteless jokes! It costs **twenty gold coins** in raw materials alone to make just one of these!"

"THAT'S TOO EXPENSIVE!!!" everyone screamed in unison.

"So wait!" I asked. "Even if you mass-produced them, you'd have to sell them for over twenty gold coins just to break even?!" "Naturally!" Grimwald nodded proudly. "Aaaaaagh. It's fundamentally flawed," the Master Fisherman groaned, shaking his head. "How is it flawed?!" Grimwald snapped.

Sigh... I looked at the angry Grimwald and let out a long breath. "Listen... twenty gold coins is a lot of money! A smokeless grill might be revolutionary, but who on earth is going to pay that much for one?" Grimwald just wagged his finger. "Your perspective is shallow, Miss Lina. True, it's hard for commoners to buy. BUT! To the wealthy, novelty-loving nobles, it'll sell like—!" "...Nobles don't usually grill their own fish and get annoyed by smoke, so I still think it won't sell." "....." Grimwald froze mid-finger-wag at my cold logic.

"Mmph! Mm-gh-mmph!" Naga groaned from the side. She was glaring at the Fisherman and trying to say something. "...Knowing Naga, she's probably complaining about her commission fee." Naga nodded frantically. "Hrrr..." the Fisherman groaned. "The deal was... we sell the grills and get rich. Thirty percent of the sales go to Naga-sensei, and the rest goes to us. But since the plan failed... thirty percent of zero is zero." "MMMMGGHHH!!!" "Now, now, Naga," I calmed the thrashing sorceress. I turned to the Fisherman. "A deal's a deal, but if you say you won't even give her a single copper, she'll probably hunt you down at your village and go on a rampage. So, at the very least, take her back with you and let her eat her fill of fish." "Well... I suppose we can do that much."

I nodded to the Fisherman and then turned back to Naga. "There you go, Naga. I know you're not happy, but which is better: working for absolutely nothing, or at least getting some free seafood? It's a no-brainer, right?" Naga quieted down. "And as for you guys..." I turned a predatory gaze toward the village men. "Next question. Which

is better: handing over all the cash you have on you as a 'nuisance fee' to us, or being handed over to the authorities and making your wives and kids back home cry?"

"ARE YOU A DEMON?!!!" the men screamed in perfect harmony.

"Run!" "Eh?" Before Grimwald could process my words, we were off. I grabbed his hand and sprinted down the road leading to Procal City. "W-What's wrong, Miss Lina?!" *You should be able to guess the situation by now!* Before I could snap back, killing intent bloomed behind us. I yanked Grimwald's hand just as a bolt of cold air whistled past his head!

"Wh-wha-wha-wha!" Yes, of course—the last group. The assassins in black! They likely hadn't made a move until now because they were waiting for us and Naga's group to wipe each other out. But Procal City was just ahead! If we broke through now, we'd win!

The road was empty. To the left was a vast forest. I glanced over my shoulder and saw the red-haired assassin in pursuit. Which meant— Just as I thought, the bushes ahead rustled and the silver-haired assassin appeared! His hands were already glowing with gathered mana. "**Fireball!**" He unleashed the light! But I had already been chanting in anticipation of a pincer attack. "**Fireball!**" At the moment the two lights were about to pass each other in mid-air— "**Blow Up!**" I snapped my fingers.

KABOOOM! My blast consumed his fireball, creating a massive mid-air explosion. Normally, this spell detonates upon impact, but I had tweaked it so I could trigger it at will. "...I've heard of this... spell arrangement, was it?" Silver-hair's voice drifted through the smoke.

"I don't know why you guys are after this grill!" I shouted at the duo. "But if you're planning to sell it, you should give up! It costs twenty gold coins in raw materials just to make one!"

"WHAT?!" As expected, they both shouted in shock. If their goal was the same as the fishermen's, they should give up and leave. "...Then we definitely can't leave it be," Silver-hair said, his voice dripping with even more hostility. "Wait... what?" I let out a dumbfounded sound. "Now we must seize the grill at any cost!" "Wait a minute, why does it work out that way?!" "No more talk!"

They closed in from both sides! *Argh! I don't get why they still want it, but I just have to escape!* "This way!" I pulled Grimwald toward the meadow opposite the forest. "Do you think you can outrun us?!" "**Flame Arrow!**" Red-hair's attack landed right in our

path, setting the grass ablaze. If they think that cuts off my route—they're soft! "**Raywing!**" I chanted the high-speed flight spell, enveloped us in a wind barrier, and took to the sky! With Grimwald in one hand, I zoomed forward. This spell's speed and altitude depend on the caster's power. I hugged the ground, flying low and fast. A wall of fire? Who cares! With the wind barrier up, I didn't even feel the heat. Grimwald, being outside the barrier, might have found it a bit hot and painful being dragged along, but a man has to endure some things!

We left the assassins in the dust, looped back to the road, and headed straight for Procal City!

"All that's left is to bring it to the castle." I deactivated the spell as we reached the entrance of Procal City. I could have flown all the way to the castle, but it's hard to control that spell in crowded streets, I was getting tired, and I was a *little* concerned that Grimwald's grip on my hand was getting weaker and weaker as I dragged him along.

"F-Finally... we're here..." Though he was ragged and exhausted, Grimwald was still clutching that backpack for dear life. "If... if possible... can we... rest... first...?" He had a point—I could have squeezed a dinner out of him as a break—but there was a chance they'd stop letting commoners into the castle after evening. Plus, the assassins were likely still on our tails. "No. Let's head straight to the castle. Those guys might catch up." "Tohohoho..." Grimwald groaned and began to stagger forward. It was a lively city with stalls lining the streets. We passed through the shopping district and entered a residential area. It was quieter here, with fewer people... And then, killing intent flashed!

I dashed forward and shoved Grimwald in the back! *Thwack-thwack-thwack!* A split second later, a volley of fire arrows rained down where we had just been standing. Dropping down from above were the two assassins. "To the castle!" I yelled. Grimwald summoned his last bit of strength and bolted. "Don't let him go!" The assassins moved to follow. But. "Hey, what's this?" The assassins stopped. In my right hand, I was holding up... a grill. "You had it?!" Red-hair cried out. I gave a mysterious smirk. "If you want it that badly, I might be willing to sell it. The price is negotiable, though." However... "Don't be fooled!" Silver-hair shouted. "That's just a normal grill!" *Tch! He saw through it!* It was just a dummy grill I bought along the way. But the few seconds I bought were enough for Grimwald to get ahead! "After him!" "Right!" The two dashed after Grimwald. I chased after them, chanting under my breath. Grimwald rounded a corner, and as the assassins followed— "**Freeze Arrow!**" I fired the spell just as they were turning the corner! "Whoa?!" One bolt frozen Red-hair's foot to the ground, but

Silver-hair dodged easily, and the stray cold energy just coated the ground in ice. "With a spell of that level—!" Silver-hair shouted as he rounded the corner— And then. He stepped right on the ice I had "missed" with. *Slip!*

THUD.

It was a painful-sounding crash. In that interval, I caught up to them. "I request an audience!" Grimwald's voice rang out. He had finally reached the castle gates and was talking to the guards. "I am Grimwald, the researcher commissioned by Lord Crivelle's eldest son, Lord Elias! I have brought the results of my research! Behold!" He pulled the grill out of his pack and held it high. The two guards froze. ".....It... looks like a grill...?" After a long silence, Grimwald nodded vigorously. "Exactly! Using the pinnacle of magical technology, this grill... produces NO SMOKE when you cook fish!" The guards looked at each other. "...F-Fine. Wait here." One guard ran into the castle. And, before I knew it, the two assassins had vanished into thin air.

"So, it is you. The one Elias entrusted with magical research—" The voice of a man echoed through the red-carpeted audience chamber. Sitting on the throne was a middle-aged man: Lord Crivelle himself.

After a long wait, we were invited inside. We weren't met by Elias, but by the Lord himself. Beside him were two young men, likely brothers around twenty years old. They looked very similar, but one was notably pale. "I am Grimwald. This is Miss Lina, who acted as my guard during the journey." "I see. And? What have you created?" "This." Grimwald held out the grill. A guard took it and handed it to the Lord. The Lord tinkered with it for a while before asking, "And what power does this grill possess?" "Hah! If you use that grill to cook fish, it produces no smoke!" .....*Silence.*

An awkward quiet filled the room. "...Ah..." Lord Crivelle finally found his voice. "...Anything else?" "Anything... else?" Grimwald thought for a moment and clapped his hands. "It won't smoke if you grill meat or vegetables, either!" "...No, that's not what I meant. For example... if you throw it, does it slice through marble pillars and return to your hand?" "Hahaha! You jest! That would just be some bizarre weapon. What I have created is a genuine, smokeless grill." "......I seeeeee....." With a voice like ice, the Lord slowly turned his head toward the pale young man. "...Elias..." "Y-Yes, Father!" "So... the 'magical research' you poured a fortune into... resulted in a 'smokeless grill'?" "B-But Father, I only heard that 'something amazing was being made'!" "I see. It is indeed 'amazing' in many ways... but you invested without even asking what it was?" "Well, you see—!" "...Hmm. If you can only spend money like that,

I cannot entrust this territory to you. I suppose my successor shall be Esios instead." "FATHERRRRRR!!!" "Now, now, brother, calm down." "I don't want to be comforted by YOU!!!"

The brotherly spat began. ...Wait... an inheritance feud is starting because of a fish grill? ...Actually. I just realized something. "U-Um..." Grimwald timidly interrupted the bickering family. "...About my reward..."

"GET OUT!!!" everyone shouted in unison.

"Why..." Grimwald muttered to himself as we walked down the street after being kicked out of the castle. "Why was I treated like that? Why can they not understand the true value of that grill?" I felt like Grimwald was the one who understood the true value the least, but I kept my mouth shut. "The world does not understand me..." Usually, when someone says that, it's because they don't understand the world... but I didn't say that out loud either. "Well, at least I got the grill back... But everything was so confusing. Lord Elias suddenly turned cold... and we never found out who those two assassins were."

"Ah... well..." I scratched my head. To be honest, I had a pretty good idea who they were. They were likely agents sent by Elias himself. Elias, in a power struggle with his brother, must have panicked when he got the letter from Grimwald. If the result of his "grand investment" was a fish grill, he'd lose points, not gain them. So, he tried to seize the grill and bury the evidence. The fact that Elias was already pale when we entered the throne room was proof enough. It was just a guess, but it was too miserable to say out loud.

"Now, now. Don't be so down," I patted his shoulder. "If you work hard, something good will happen eventually." "Ugh... thank you. It helps to hear that... By the way, Miss Lina... it's very hard to say this, but..." "I know, I know," I said, anticipating him. "The request fee. You already paid me in advance, but after traveling expenses, you have almost nothing left. Which means you don't even have the funds to get back to your lab." "It's embarrassing, but... yes." I patted his shoulder again. "It'll be tough, but do your best!"

Snap! For some reason, Grimwald froze. "...W-Wait! Wait a minute, Miss Lina! Usually, in this flow of conversation, you'd say 'Since it's tough, take some of this back' and return part of the fee...!" "Ahahaha! What are you talking about? A deal's a deal!" In the first place, it was Grimwald's fault for not being able to realistically judge the value of his own grill. "Anyway, that's that. Stay strong!" And so, leaving the stunned

Grimwald behind, I went on my way.

(Scramble Grill: The End)

The Forest of the Sorceress

When I came to, I was in an unfamiliar place. A dark, dull ceiling and the smell of medicine drifting from nowhere. It seemed I was lying on a bed, but... "Um..." "Heh heh heh... It seems you've finally woken up..." Before I could grasp the situation, a voice called out—it belonged to a young woman. "!?" I sat up reflexively, and my eyes fell upon a single silhouette standing in the doorway of the dimly lit room. The figure was completely covered in a dark grey cloak, with a matching hood pulled low over their eyes. Their face was mostly hidden in the shadows of the hood, leaving only the mouth visible. If she hadn't spoken, I wouldn't have been able to tell her age, or even her gender. She looked incredibly suspicious. If you bumped into her in the middle of the night, you couldn't complain if someone threw a rock at her. But for now, she didn't seem to harbor any ill intent. "Who... exactly are you?"

At my question, she let out a low, stifled chuckle. "I should be the one asking you that... Why were you floating down the river from upstream...?" "From upstream...?" I frowned at her question, and then— "Oh... right!" I finally remembered what had happened. "That's right! I remember now! There was a river near that place, wasn't there!" "Ho... so you've finally recalled something..." "I guess so." I got off the bed and scratched my head. "Well, actually, I was traveling with a companion... and as we were walking along the highway by the river, we started fighting over a copper coin we found on the road. We ended up trading a few offensive spells back and forth..." "Trading... offensive spells over a copper coin...?" "Yeah. I mean, they were just things like Flare Arrow and Damu Brass. It was just a bit of light play between girls, you know?" "...And in the general world, is that what people call 'light play'?" "Of course." I answered firmly and without hesitation to her somewhat intimidated question. At

least in my social circles, it was perfectly normal. "So, while we were at it, I guess I got blown away and fell into the river. ...Wait, so does that mean you're the one who saved me?" "Heh heh heh... That's right... I went into the forest to gather herbs and found you washed up on the riverbank... You've been asleep for about half a day..." She answered with another meaningless, suppressed laugh, still looking downward. ...I really wish she'd stop doing that... it's creepy... "Th-thanks. Oh, right. I should introduce myself. My name is Lina." "I see... then you may call me Michelle..." "May call you"...? "Um... I wanted to ask... Michelle, why do you... well, how should I put it... why do you look and act like that?" "Heh heh... One way or another... I have been like this since a long, long time ago..." "Since a long time ago... wait, does that mean you don't age!?" "No... I mean since I was a child..." Then just say that. "My late mother taught me that this is normal..." "Uh... I have a feeling it's not very normal..." "Hoh... you think so too...?" She took a sudden step forward, and I reflexively stepped back. "Heh heh heh... What a coincidence... Actually, I've been thinking that lately too... especially since my mother died and I started going into town myself... heh heh heh heh." "...So... what is with that 'heh heh' laugh anyway...?" "My mother taught me... 'As a sorceress, you must never forget to let out a meaningful, suppressed laugh every now and then, as if you've just remembered something'..." "Oh boy... wait, so were both you and your mother sorceresses?" "Heh heh heh... Yes... exactly." ...Seriously, enough with the 'heh heh'... A sorceress is, of course, a type of mage. If I had to say how they differ from the type commonly called 'mages' like myself, it would be the immediacy of their effects. A 'mage' uses the tip of their tongue, their own spirit, and sometimes tools to cast spells. In contrast, a sorceress uses rituals, tools, incantations, and time. ...Well, definitions aside, the general public simply thinks of them as 'creepy people who use persistent, dark ritual magic.' In that sense, Michelle was certainly as sorceress-like as one could possibly be... "But... don't people look at you strangely for being a sorceress?" "Heh heh heh... You're telling me this now...?" At my words, she let out her usual suppressed laugh. "Looking at me strangely is the least of it... In fact, right now, a mob has already surrounded this house..." ..... "Whaaaaaaaaat!?" I couldn't help but shout at her casual remark.

Deep in the forest submerged in night, countless lights were scattered. They were the torches held by the people gathered around the house. There were—a hundred, maybe two hundred. The clear night air was thick with a tense, murderous intent. "H-hiieeeeeee!" I quietly closed the window I had been peeking through and lowered my voice. "W-wait! We're seriously surrounded!" "Heh heh... Of course. I wasn't joking."

Michelle said, also lowering her voice. "This is no time for suppressed laughing!

...Seriously, how could you talk to me so casually in this situation...?" "Heh... People started gathering once evening fell... but the reality was too scary to face, so I just tried to engross myself in our conversation..." "Escapism!?!? ...But why has it come to this!?" "There's been a minor incident in town... and it seems they think I'm the mastermind..." "It seems... this is no time to be calm! I'll hear the details later, but does that mean you have nothing to do with this incident!?" "Of course not..." "Then—for now, we're getting out of here! Otherwise, who knows when those people will come swarming in..." "...But... how do we escape...?" "Hmph! Leave that to me!" Full of confidence—but still in a whisper—I declared firmly. Of course, if I felt like it, scattering a hundred or two hundred rioters wouldn't be difficult. However, in this situation where the circumstances were unclear, I couldn't exactly do that. Since the house was surrounded, there were only two escape routes. Namely: ascending to the heavens or vanishing into the earth. There was the option of using a tunneling spell to escape underground, but digging blindly without knowing the local geography could lead us into a strange place. And if they realized we were fleeing underground, it would be no joke if they poured water into the tunnel. In that case, the remaining method was— "Michelle, does this house have a skylight?" "There used to be one... but my mother said, 'A sorceress's house has no need for something with such a healthy image as a skylight,' and buried it with earthen walls..." ...What kind of person was this girl's mother...? Well, anyway, putting the mother aside for now... "Regardless, we're escaping!" Declaring this unilaterally, I chanted a spell under my breath. And then— "Vibration Bomb!"

GOGAAH!

My strike blew a hole through the roof of the house! "Wh-what are you doing...!?" Ignoring Michelle's protest, I chanted the next spell. *THUD!* Almost immediately, the sound of someone pounding on the door came from somewhere. It wasn't a polite knock. It was definitely intended to break the door down. The explosion probably provoked the crowd outside. But— "Levitation!" Holding Michelle in one arm, I released the spell! "Ah..." "Shh! Don't make a sound!" The two of us floated up through the broken roof into the night sky. Looking down from there— ...H-hyoeeeeeee... The area around the house was already a sea of people. "It’s open!" "Go, go!" "Where is she!?" A door had been breached somewhere, and the crowd swarmed into the house one after another. ...Fortunately, no one was looking up, but we needed to escape to a safe place for the time being. The area around the house was a vast forest. There would be no shortage of places to hide. I controlled the spell and moved away from the site as fast as I could.

"There's a cave a little further east from here..." Michelle whispered this once the

light of the torches held by the people was no longer visible beyond the trees. "Okay. Then for now..." But before I could finish my sentence.

DOOOOOOM!

With a flashy sound and light, a flower of flame bloomed in the night sky right above us! Fireball!? "We've been found!?" If we stayed like this, we'd be at a disadvantage—conspicuous and slow-moving. I quickly controlled the spell and landed on the ground with Michelle. Then, a familiar idiotic laugh echoed! "Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! To think you could deceive my eyes—the eyes of Naga the White Serpent—with such a rudimentary trick as escaping from the sky! ...But... I came here to hunt down a villain at the request of the townspeople... I never expected you to be on that side! Lina Inverse!" Along with those words, a figure emerged from the darkness between the trees, stepping on fallen leaves— "...Who is this? This strange person..." "I don't know her." To Michelle's question in a cold tone, I gave a cold, dry response. "W-wait, Lina, could you stop with that dismissive way of speaking...?" My self-proclaimed rival, Naga the White Serpent—also known as goldfish poop—said this looking troubled. "...So you *do* know her..." "...Well... yeah..." "She's the 'companion' I mentioned earlier. ...Though, right now, she seems to be on the side of the rioters..." I answered Michelle. "Hmph! 'Rioters' is an unkind way to put it! Why don't you call us volunteers who have come to defeat the evil sorceress!?" "...Evil...?" Beside me, Michelle muttered, perhaps feeling unsatisfied at being called an 'evil sorceress' by Naga, who wore a costume that looked exactly like an evil mage's. "But with that Fireball just now, everyone else should have noticed too! Don't think you can escape any longer! Ho-ho-ho-ho!" "Ugh..." It was true— Behind Naga, who was laughing boastfully, several lights were approaching through the trees. ...In that case... I guess forced breakthrough is the only option! "...It's okay... I'll manage somehow..." Michelle whispered beside me just as I was about to chant an offensive spell. "...Lina... cover your mouth and nose with your cloak." "............?" Without grasping the meaning of those words, I covered my nose and mouth with my cloak for now. "Ho-ho-ho-ho! I wonder what kind of act this is, Lina Inverse! Such..." *Thump. Zzz... Zzz...* Before she could even finish her sentence, Naga collapsed on the spot and began to breathe quietly in her sleep. —No, it wasn't just Naga. The lights visible beyond her were also falling to the ground one by one. "I see... you used medicine." "No." Michelle shook her head at my words, spoken through the cloak I used as a mask. She turned on her heel and began walking deep into the forest. "This part of the forest is a habitat for Suragata Mushrooms... on night's like this, during this season... at around this time, they release spores... spores with a sedative effect... I'm used to it, so I'm fine, but..." I see. So she not only knew the terrain of the forest but was also intimately

familiar with the distribution and properties of the plants. "Come... let’s hurry... to the cave." As urged, I began to walk after her.

"Lately... it seems there's been an incident where livestock have been dying one after another in various parts of town..." After we reached the depths of the cave and sat on the ground facing each other, Michelle began to tell me the story bit by bit. Seeing Michelle, all in grey, amidst the glowing moss made her look even more eerie. "So... I was suspected because I do the suspicious job of a sorceress..." "I see... Just to be sure, I'll ask one more time: you definitely didn't do it, right?" "Naturally... I am a very decent sorceress... I don't do things that trouble innocent people... ...Though, once I mixed up the medicine for a ritual and birds nearby fell dead... and a mysterious creature my mother summoned and let loose howls deep in the forest every full moon..." "...A mysterious creature...?" "I tried asking my mother about it before she died... but she just turned pale and went silent... she never told me what it was. But... if I say that's all, then that's all..." ... 'That's all'... I have a feeling that even one of those examples is enough of a nuisance to those around you... "Even in my work, there should be almost no reason for trouble... I take requests from girls in town to manipulate the man they like with a love curse... or make sure misfortune befalls a man who's cheating... I only do work that makes someone happy..." "Uh, well... the client might be happy, but... I'm not sure if that's exactly 'healthy'..." "Hehhhh..." At my remark, Michelle slid across the ground toward me like she was gliding. "Heh heh heh heh... I see... you think so too... that it’s unhealthy..." "U-um... well... you see..." She drew even closer. From the gap in her hood, her small red lips twisted into a grin. *Yikes*. Scary!

I wanted to run away, but we were in a cave. Behind me was a wall. All I could do was desperately press myself against the wall. "Heh heh heh heh... What a coincidence... Actually, I think so too..." "Hi... wait, what?" "While my mother was alive... I thought this was normal... but after she died and I went into town myself... I started to realize that my senses were... misaligned with the general public... When I go to the town's downtown area... no one is letting out suppressed laughs... and no one is wearing grey robes..." "W-well... that’s true..." No matter how wide the world is, a downtown area where everyone wears grey robes and lets out suppressed laughs would be incredibly creepy. I definitely wouldn't want that to exist. "But... among the clients who come to request sorcery... there were many who hid their faces or who looked good with a suppressed laugh... so I thought that was just how the world was..." ...Those are some unpleasant clients... Well, since they go to request something from a sorceress—who doesn't have a very good image—they might feel guilty and hide their faces or lower their voices, which could lead to suspicious

behavior. "I wanted to dispel this image and get along better with the townspeople, so I made some efforts... but those didn't go well either..." "Efforts... like what?" "I heard some advice from someone before... 'Start with a greeting'..." "Well... that's not wrong." "So... since I had errands during the day... at night... I stood on a street corner and tried smiling at the people passing by..." "Wait a second." I drew closer to Michelle. "You tried smiling... you don't mean... in that outfit, while saying 'heh heh heh heh'...?" At my question, she nodded slowly. "...Everyone ran away." "OF COURSE THEY DID!" I couldn't help but shout. Just think about it. Walking alone at night, you suddenly notice a dark figure standing quietly by the roadside. A pale face half-peeks out from under a robe, the lips curled into a smile, and a low, suppressed 'heh heh' leaks out... To be blunt, it's terrifying. It’s not a sign of friendship; it’s just harassment. "I wonder... what exactly was wrong..." "Everything! Everything! ...Boy... your sense of the world is completely off..." "Heh heh heh heh... You're right... Oh, Lina... I have something I want to ask of you..." "W-what is it...?" She held out her right hand in front of me and folded her fingers one by one. "It seems you are also a mage... and you seem to know the world well... So, first... help me clear my name... and second... give me advice so I can become a more normal girl and get along with the townspeople... Of course, I'll reward you sufficiently..." "Hmm..." I thought about it. At this stage, I only had information from Michelle. In these cases, it often turns out that everything I was told was a lie once a full investigation begins. However— Conversely, if what Michelle was saying was true, I couldn't abandon her in this situation. Conclusion: I can abandon her anytime, but I can only help her now. Then— "All right, Michelle. I'll help you." At my answer, she lowered her head and her shoulders trembled. "I see... I'm glad... heh... heh heh heh heh... with this... with this, I'll finally be a normal girl too..." "............No... for starters... let's stop that 'heh heh' suppressed laugh..." "Then... how should I laugh...?" "How... well... more like... cheerfully, in a loud voice." "Kuhahahaha! ...Something like this...?" "No... 'kuhahaha' is also a bit... And above all, always looking down gives a gloomy impression. For now, stop wearing that hood so low..." "I see... this..." In response, she pushed her hood back... "...!" At that moment, I couldn't help but groan and freeze on the spot.

Carmidone City. It's a castle town where you can see Lord Casimion's castle on a hill away from the town, but its scale as a castle town is quite small. ...There is a theory that Lord Casimion's fief itself is small... Deep in the vast forest surrounding the town is Michelle's house. —So, for now, I decided to head into town to investigate the situation. Naturally, Michelle, whose face is known to the townspeople, stayed behind in the cave today. I, whose face is unknown, would be the one asking around. As for the method, I should be able to gather a fair amount of information if I visit a few of

the inn-slash-tavern-slash-cafeterias common in such towns while having lunch. I immediately headed for a shop that caught my eye— "Ho-ho-ho-ho! To think you'd have the nerve to show your face so soon after yesterday! Lina Inverse!"

CRASH!

As soon as I opened the door to the shop, I was hit with an idiotic laugh and fell flat on my face. ...No explanation is needed... The one pigging out at the table in the middle of the shop was, of course, Naga the White Serpent. ...Of all things, to walk into the very shop where Naga was... what is wrong with me...? As I managed to stumble to my feet, Naga laughed softly through her nose. "Hmph! It seems you didn't expect to be found by me so suddenly! But now that it's come to this, we must settle yesterday's score!" "Naga, wait a second." "Hmph! Are you afraid!? Lina!?" "No... it's not that..." It wouldn't be difficult to blow Naga away with a single offensive spell. But if I did that, it might interfere with my investigation, and above all, I hadn't eaten lunch yet. "I have no objection to settling things, but first I have to eat lunch." "Hmph... saying things like that..." "I'll treat you if you like." —It goes without saying that Naga's attitude changed instantly at that one sentence.

"Livestock burned to a crisp?" Poking at a fillet steak, I couldn't help but repeat Naga's words. "Hmph. That's right." Naga, sitting across the table, said boastfully for some reason as she gulped down brandy from a mug. "It seems there was an incident where people woke up in the morning to find several of their livestock burned to a crisp. So it was decided it must be the work of the sorceress living in the forest." "Hmm...?" Chewing on a fried shrimp, I frowned. "Doesn't that... seem a bit strange? In the first place, on what basis did they decide it was the work of a sorceress? And besides, is there even a spell that can 'burn livestock to a crisp' with sorcery?" "Now that you mention it... that's true." Naga answered disinterestedly. ...Hmm... "Oh, excuse me." I caught the shopkeeper passing by. "I wanted to ask... that incident where the livestock were burned to death... They say the culprit is the forest sorceress... but where did that story come from?" The man thought for a moment. "Where... well... everyone was whispering about it..." "Then... who did you hear it from? That the sorceress was the culprit." "I knew the rumors about a strange incident... I think the other day, Lord Casimion gathered everyone in the square and said, 'Many rumor that the incident in town is the work of the forest sorceress, but we must not make assumptions. Never act rashly out of anger,' and that's how I found out about those rumors." "The Lord?" "Yeah. Well, there were quite a few people who saw that sorceress standing in the street at night, letting out suppressed laughs. No doubt she's suspicious." ...I have no defense for that... ...But it was strange for the Lord to personally intervene in town rumors. And as for Lords, it's usually decided that

they’re actually villains. "This... might be interesting to look into..." Poking at a crab salad, I muttered quietly.

"...How was it...?" "Well... there *is* someone suspicious, but..." That evening. To Michelle's question as soon as I returned to the cave, I gave a vague answer while scratching my head. —By the way, as for settling things with Naga, she seemed to have completely forgotten about it while eating, so I left the cafeteria without worry, continued my investigation, and came back. "That's how it is. ...Though, rather than 'that person is the culprit,' it's more like a 'something's weird' level of suspicion..." "Heh heh... I see..." She let out a suppressed laugh, still wearing her hood low. "Um... Michelle... I hate to be persistent, but you should stop laughing like that..." "Why...? Yesterday Lina said 'heh heh' was no good, so I practiced all day today and changed it to 'fufu'..." ...Practiced... Does that mean she was in this empty cave all day today, laughing 'fufufufufu' the whole time...? Thinking about it, I felt it was just scary... "Uh... I appreciate you going to the trouble of practicing, but whether it’s 'heh heh' or 'fufu,' it’s better to avoid suppressed laughs altogether..." "It’s difficult... The road to the general public is still long... Anyway... I'll listen to your story while we have dinner..." Saying this, she took a mountain of mushrooms out of a burlap bag. ...Wait... some of those have some very strange colors... "Um... let me ask... are those mushrooms okay to eat...?" "Of course... I went to the forest to pick them today while practicing my laugh... Some of them look bad... but they are all definitely edible..." "Hmm... You’re quite familiar with this forest." "Well... it’s my forest..." She began preparing to start a fire. "Your forest... were you born and raised here?" "That too, but... for now, I own this forest..." "Hmm. I see..." My words froze. I turned my face toward Michelle. "Um... just now... did you say 'I own it'...?" "Yes..." " 'This forest'... from where to where exactly...?" "Where... you mean the forest around the town of Carmidone... all of it..." "All...!?" All of it... that forest was incredibly vast... "I don't know the specifics... but apparently an ancestor contributed to the King... and received this whole area. To be used for cultivating medicinal herbs... and it’s been managed for generations... herbs are still grown in various places..." "R-really...!?" ...I had no idea she was such a large landowner... —Wait. A thought suddenly occurred to me. "Which... means... maybe!" But before I could voice that thought. "Ho-ho-ho-ho! To think you were hiding in a place like this! Lina Inverse!" Naga's idiotic laugh was heard from outside the cave!

"Heh heh... It seems we were followed... Lina..." "Aaah! This is no time for suppressed laughing! Anyway..."

I handed Michelle the bags I had bought in town, gave her a few instructions, and walked toward the cave entrance. And then— "Hmph! It seems you've resigned

yourself and come out! Lina!" There to meet me was, as expected, Naga the White Serpent, along with several dozen townspeople armed with sticks, hoes, and shovels. "Where's that woman!? In the back of the hole!?" "You're an accomplice too, aren't you!?" "Get in the way and you'll pay..." "Burst Rondo!"

DOOOOOM!

Rather than restraint, a single spell. By exploding a small patch of grass nearby, the crowd fell silent. "Just so you know— Lynching Michelle won't solve the case." "What... do you mean...?" To the question from Townsperson A, who frowned, I said with a natural expression, "I mean she's not the culprit." "What...?" A stir went through the townspeople. Good. Now it seems we can have a proper conversation. If I told people who were convinced she was the culprit that she wasn't, they wouldn't even listen. But first, by saying 'that won't solve the case,' I made them willing to listen to what I had to say. However— "Ho-ho-ho-ho! You make me laugh! Lina Inverse!" Suddenly throwing cold water on the atmosphere was Naga's idiotic laugh! "Not the culprit, you say!? After all this! If you think you can talk me—of all people—into believing such a lie, you are sorely mistaken! How can someone who looks so suspicious not be the culprit!?" "LOOK WHO'S TALKING!" My voice and the townspeople's voice synchronized perfectly. I pointed my finger at Naga. "If everyone who looks suspicious is the culprit, then you're the true culprit of every incident in the world!" The townspeople nodded at my words. Of course, Naga wasn't one to be fazed by such a thing. "Hmph! If you cannot understand my sense of style, I'd rather you not speak for others! —More importantly— You're wasting time with this idle talk, but you don't intend to let this Michelle person escape through another exit in the meantime, do you?" "Heh heh heh heh... An interesting idea, but you're wrong... unfortunately..." The voice that came from behind just then was Michelle's. As usual, she was in her grey cloak, with the matching hood pulled low. She stepped forward. "Heh heh heh heh... I won't run or hide... In the first place, I..." Before she could finish her sentence.

THUMP!

An offensive spell struck, blowing away several of the townspeople! "Wh...!?" "What do you think you're doing! You witch!" Eyes filled with murderous intent and hostility focused on Michelle all at once. Naga also pointed her finger at me. "Hmph! If you thought you could outwit us with that, you're still naive! Lina!" "W-wait! That just now was..." "No use talking! Ice Arrow!" Naga's offensive spell came flying, cutting off my words! I jumped at the stunned Michelle and managed to dodge the arrows of cold. "We're running for now! Michelle!" "I understand..." In this situation, talk was no longer possible. Michelle and I dashed off. "Follow them!" "Hmph! You won't get away!"

Naga and the others shouted as they gave chase. In this case, I have no choice but to use a weak offensive spell to somehow lose them! I chanted a spell under my breath— "...Wait..." Just before the spell was complete, Michelle whispered from beside me. "...Don't attack... Go right..." Saying this, she ducked into a beast trail between the trees that could hardly be called a path. She must have had a reason. I followed her without hesitation. "...Keep low..." Following Michelle's words, I ran through the brush with my head down. "...Even if it's just a threat, if you strike them, it will be difficult to clear the misunderstanding..." Michelle said in a monologue-like tone as she ran ahead of me. "Well, that's true. So I guess there are animals or plants around here that can stop them?" "Vampire plants..." Oh. It was true. I could hear screams from behind. ...I wondered if it was bad to avoid striking them directly but to lead them into being attacked by vampire plants, but for now, I couldn't worry about small things. "...But... you believed me..." Michelle said as we ran through the forest. "Believed you...?" "That the one who attacked the townspeople... was not me..." "That attack came right in the middle of when you were talking. You shouldn't have had time to chant a spell." ...Naga and the others didn't seem to notice that at all... "Probably some of the group trying to frame you were among the townspeople and fired off a spell. To keep us from talking." "Heh heh heh heh... I see, they’re quite thorough... But it’s true that this has made talking even more difficult... Well... I wonder what we should do..." "Now we have to— Go right to the mastermind's place and settle things once and for all!" "I see... heh heh... that would be interesting..." At my words, she broke into a grin.

Lord Casimion's castle was built on a hill a little away from the town. Naturally, the Lord was inside. If we wanted a direct confrontation, breaking into the castle was unavoidable... "Are you ready? Michelle? We're going to charge straight to the castle from here." In an alleyway at the edge of town. At my words, Michelle twisted her mouth in dissatisfaction. "Surprising them in broad daylight... I think it would be better to wait for nightfall...?" "True, if we were just infiltrating, that would be better. But what we have to do this time is confront the Lord directly and settle things. To clear the false charges against you. In that case, we need witnesses to see the confrontation... and it’s better if the witnesses are neutral and as numerous as possible—that's why." "I see... you want to intentionally stand out and draw the eyes of the townspeople... to make them witnesses...?" "That's it." "Then..." "Let's go!" Saying this, the two of us jumped out into the main street. "Hey! Look! It's that sorceress!" "Someone! Call the guards!" There was no way we wouldn't be found. Someone immediately raised their voice. Some were flustered, some ran, and occasionally someone picked up a nearby stick and came toward us. Ordinary citizens approaching with weapons— It would be easy to scatter them, but I couldn't do that

this time. In that case, the trick to get through was— "Michelle! Close your eyes when I give the signal!" I chanted a spell— I winked at her and activated the spell toward a man who was coming at us! "Lighting!" *FLASH!* "Gwah!?" Blinded by the explosion of light at close range, the man recoiled with a scream. Of course, Michelle and I had our eyes tightly shut. We slipped past him and ran down the street. Our target—far off, on top of the hill.

The more we ran. The number of townspeople following us gradually increased. Digging grooves in the road with Diga Chorus, blinding them with Lighting. We were getting away with tricks, but once the number of pursuers exceeded a hundred, those ceased to work. In fact, at this point, we were already being surrounded on all sides. If it came to this, our only choice was to take to the skies... I didn't like it, but I had no choice. I chanted a spell and grabbed Michelle— "Levitation!" We floated up into the air. "She's flying!" "She's trying to escape upward!" Looking down at the noisy pursuers, we rose to about the height of the rooftops. This kept them out of reach—but it wasn't all advantageous. In any case, this Levitation was tear-inducingly slow. If you raced a running child, you'd almost certainly lose. If we floated to the castle like this, the sun would literally set. Furthermore, I couldn't use large-scale spells while floating with this spell. And besides— "Ice Arrow!" *Whoosh!* Along with the voice, the sound of cutting air came from the side! "Ray Wing!" Reflexively, I released a wind spell I had chanted just in case! *GUGHOU!* The 'wind' I released blew away a dozen or so arrows of cold that were coming at us. And then— "Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! You did well to survive that, Lina Inverse! I'll praise you as my rival!" In the direction of the voice—standing on the edge of a nearby rooftop and looking this way was Naga, whom I had lost in the forest! Tch! I knew she'd find us! In that case, the other pursuer—the someone who was trying to frame Michelle and had blown away some of the townspeople with an offensive spell in the forest—they, or a group of them, had surely found us too. Being struck by an offensive spell from nowhere while facing Naga was something I absolutely wanted to avoid. That being the case, I didn't have time to deal with Naga indefinitely! She pointed her finger at us. "Hmph! You did well to set those strange plants on me in the forest! But if you thought such a thing could do anything to me..." "Sleeping." *Thump*. Leaving Naga, who had begun to sleep soundly with one of my spells, we began moving toward the castle again. ...But the problem was this slow moving speed. A way to speed up... —That's it! "Michelle, hold on tight!" I chanted a spell— "Ray Wing!" I released the gale toward ourselves!

BUGOU!

The wind roared in my ears, and we were pushed by the strong wind and went flying toward the castle. Good! It's a bit rough, but speed-up complete! After a while, we

slowed down, but we just had to do the same thing again. I chanted a spell under my breath— —It was at the same time. "...Behind us..." I heard Michelle's whisper just as murderous intent emerged from behind. "—!?" Turning my head over my shoulder, I recognized the approaching arrows of cold— "Ray Wing!" I scattered them again with the spell I had released. The one who fired that shot was—Naga, standing on a rooftop! "Naga!? You're awake already!?" I knew well how fast Naga recovered from damage, but to think she'd wake from a sleep spell so quickly... At my words, she puffed out her chest. "Hmph! Your reading is shallow! Lina! I simply fell off the roof while I was sleeping, and that woke me up!" ...I see... But now, I had to do something about Naga or we wouldn't be able to move forward!

I controlled the spell and landed on a nearby roof. "It seems you've resigned yourself! Lina! If you surrender quietly, I might forgive you for about a hundred gold coins!" "Naga, I'm sorry, but I don't have time for your delusions! I have to get you out of the way and go to the real culprit of this incident!" At the mention of the 'real culprit,' which I said loud enough to be heard, a slight stir occurred among the townspeople who were watching from the street below. "...The real culprit...?" "What does she mean...?" "She's lying! It's a bluff!" "...Wait... but..." Even if the townspeople felt that way, Naga was not one to flinch at such words. "Ho-ho-ho-ho! You make me laugh! You said something like that when we met in the forest too, but do you think such a lie will work at this point!? If there really is a 'real culprit,' I'd like to know where they are!" "—Right there." I pointed straight to Lord Casimion's castle on top of the hill. *Buzz buzz buzz buzz*... The townspeople stirred again. I stared down Naga. "Think about it. Naga. From a long time ago, the mastermind of such incidents is usually the Minister or the Lord." "...W-well... that's true, but..." Just as Naga said that. "—How insolent!" A loud, booming voice came from the street below. Everyone's eyes gathered there— A man in black light armor, accompanied by a group of fully armed soldiers. "Thieves! To call Lord Casimion the mastermind is beyond insolent! I shall strike you down here! Prepare yourself!" "...Who is this? This intense guy?" "...Lord Casimion's Captain of the Guard..." Michelle answered my whisper. —I see. So it would be inconvenient for us to go any further, so he's trying to silence us here. All right. Then it's finally time. I pointed my finger at the soldiers. "Slaying us on the spot without even trying to verify the facts! But that intent to shut us up is already saying, 'We're the bad guys'!" "Silence! Girl! To be insulted to that extent is unforgivable!" "You didn't intend to forgive us in the first place." "Nothing but slaying! Archers! Ready!" "Everyone! Run!" Even without waiting for my voice, the townspeople, sensing the air of battle, were hurrying to escape. But with so many people, they couldn't move easily. Before the townspeople had even finished evacuating. "Fire!" The Captain's command was given! This is bad! In this situation where the townspeople are

crowded together, if they fire arrows indiscriminately, people will be hit by the stray arrows! —But then! "Burst Rondo!"

GOBAH!

The ground and soil leaped up, blowing away the group of archers!

"—What...!?" The Captain's gaze shifted in shock— There was Naga, standing at the edge of the street, having landed there at some point! "You! Weren't you an ally!?" "Hmph! Of course I'm an ally! But— An ally of the townspeople who brought the request to me, not you. It seemed you were going to involve those townspeople, so I interfered—that's all!" Oh! A fine line for Naga! She must have some plan to use this to demand a higher fee from the townspeople later! "Curse you! In that case, I shall slay you as well!" "Hmph! If you can..." 'Ice Arrow!' *Kkakikakikokakikikiiiin!* Before Naga could even finish her sentence. A volley of arrows of cold flew from among the townspeople, turning Naga into a block of ice in an instant! Were they the Lord's subordinates disguised as townspeople!? They probably started the attack at the Captain's signal of 'slay.' Several mages in ordinary town clothes all turned toward us and began chanting spells. —But now it’s our turn! I released the spell I had chanted! "Vibration Bomb!" *GOGAH!* The strike I fired blew apart the ice that was restraining Naga, rather than hitting the mages or the Captain! "Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho!" The idiotic laugh that followed caused the mages to hesitate. "To think you'd do that so suddenly! I'll make you pay for this!" She began chanting a spell. "—What are you doing. Target the ones on the roof first!" Naga or us? The Captain's reprimand flew at the mages who were hesitating on which to target. The mages turned toward us and shouted, 'Ice Arrow!' They fired arrows of cold in a predictable pattern. Naïve! They shouldn't underestimate my speed of speech! "Ray Wing!" With the wind spell I chanted instantly, I blew away the approaching arrows of cold. And then— "Damu Brass!" *BOGOGABAHHH!* Then, Naga's angry strike blew the mages away! Hmph. That's what happens when you recklessly lay a hand on Naga. "—Now—the only one left is..." I looked toward where the Captain and a few soldiers remained. "...C-curse you! In that case!" The Captain reached for the sword at his waist— "—What is all this noise!?" A thick voice came from behind the Captain.

The Captain turned around in a hurry— And his face completely changed color. Michelle, standing quietly behind me, whispered, "...That’s..." "—Lord Casimion, right?" "...Yes..." He looked to be in his forties. A stout, bearded man. "It’s dangerous! Lord! Please go back!" "I'm asking what is going on!" The Lord questioned him, unfazed by the Captain's frantic words. "We're playing 'Find the Real Culprit' of the livestock burning incident!" The one who answered that question in a clear voice was not the

Captain, but me. "Find the Real Culprit!?" "That's right. ...In other words..." I pointed my finger straight at Lord Casimion. "I'm going to prove that the real culprit of the series of livestock burning incidents in town is none other than you, Lord Casimion!" "...W-what nonsense!?" The Lord's face showed genuine agitation. The townspeople who had scattered were also gathering to see what was happening. "Lord Casimion! I heard you made an announcement in front of the townspeople saying, 'There are rumors that the forest sorceress is the culprit, but be careful not to act rashly'! Until then, none of the townspeople were making such rumors!" *Stir...* The townspeople stirred as if they remembered. "I heard that most of the forest around this town belongs to Michelle here. It's certainly a vast area. —Now, here's a question. If Michelle were to be the culprit and was exiled or executed—what would happen to the ownership of the forest?" "It's obvious. It would be confiscated and become the Lord's." Naga answered as if it were a matter of course. *Buzz buzz*. The townspeople stirred even more. The Lord became even more agitated. I continued. "Wanting the land, you ordered your mages to burn the town's livestock, spread anxiety among the townspeople, and then said things to make it seem like Michelle was the real culprit. You hid your own subordinates among the townspeople who swarmed her house and made them attack the townspeople with magic to make it seem like she did it—Now the suspicion against her is heavy. If the townspeople got angry and lynched her, everything would go as planned. Even if that didn't happen, if you caught her and found her guilty, the result would be the same. —Don't you think this makes much more sense than thinking 'a sorceress who had never done anything before suddenly decided to burn livestock for some unknown reason, knowing she'd be the first to be suspected'?" "W-wait a minute! You said 'due to prejudice'! Certainly, that Michelle person being suspicious might just be a rumor based on prejudice, without any evidence! But isn't it also a mere assumption without any evidence to say that I am the real culprit!?" Tch! He noticed! It was true—my reasoning was sound, but I had no evidence. It was also true that gathering evidence in that situation was impossible. All right! In that case! I chanted a spell— "Levitation!" Holding Michelle, I landed on the ground from the roof. The townspeople watched from a distance. The soldiers had recovered but couldn't move because the Lord was there. Surrounded by them all, I puffed out my chest and said, "In that case, the problem is which one the townspeople will believe! You or us!" ...Buzz buzz... The townspeople stirred again at my declaration. "Which one... well..." "But... could the Lord really..." "Still, a sorceress *is* suspicious..." Hearing the whispers reaching me, the situation was still a bit unfavorable. I patted Michelle's shoulder. "Come on, Michelle, say something to everyone!" At my urging, she quietly stepped forward. "I..." "Wait, Michelle, look them in the eye when you talk! And... take off that gloomy cloak and hood!" Saying this, I

forcefully pulled off her cloak and hood.

WHAAAAAAT!?

In an instant, a clamor filled the area. She looked to be fifteen or sixteen. Her hair was like sparkling golden thread. Her skin was as pale as porcelain. Her limbs were slender and graceful. There are many cute girls in the world, but few are truly beautiful. And Michelle was undoubtedly one of those few. By the way, she had changed into the clothes I had bought in town while we were in the cave. Of course, I had chosen clothes that would fully bring out her loveliness. This is my ultimate move! The 'Humans are Weak to Appearances' attack! Furthermore, she had changed instantly from a gloomy sorceress style to a beautiful girl. How much impact did it have on the townspeople who saw it? She looked at the townspeople with a slightly downcast look. "...I... haven't done anything..." "OHHHHHHHHHHHH!" Another clamor arose. "Y-yeah. There's no way such a cute girl would do something so bad." "I knew it all along." "Yeah. That modest attitude is cute." "The shy smile I saw once in a while was also pretty good." Just as I had calculated, mainly among the men, the opposite opinion to before became the majority. ...But... 'suspicious behavior' becomes 'modest attitude' and 'suppressed laugh' becomes 'shy smile'... how can men be so easily fooled by looks...? Well, anyway— I turned toward the Lord. "—So, it seems it's been decided. Whether the townspeople believe Michelle or you." "W-wait a minute! Certainly, I support the theory that there are no villains among cute girls, but..." You too? "So, even if you say I am the real culprit... In the first place, you said I wanted the forest land... but I've heard rumors about the forest, that it's full of strange plants and you can hear the howls of mysterious creatures... To be honest, I don't want it! Not such a scary piece of land!" Tch...! That might be true... "T-then! Why did you say 'there are rumors that the sorceress is the culprit'!?" "T-that's because I heard stories that the town was in chaos due to such rumors... Hey! Where did that story come from!? Captain of the Guard!?" ...Huh...? "A-ah! No... that was...!" Suddenly being asked by the Lord, the Captain became incoherent. ...W-wait... could it be...? "U-um... was it the Captain of the Guard who brought that story to the Lord...?" "Yes. But... wait, come to think of it, why are you, the Captain of the Guard, out here in this mess instead of the Captain of the Watch!?" "...Could it be...? Is the real culprit the Captain of the Guard!?" I couldn't help but shout. Certainly, with the title of Captain of the Guard, it would be possible to move a certain number of soldiers and mages under the guise of a 'secret mission.' But—if that was the case, what was the motive? "D-don't be ridiculous!" His face turning red with anger, the Captain shouted. "—In the first place! I have no motive for doing such a thing!" "...He's taking it out on me for rejecting him..." .....silence..... At Michelle's whispered words, the area

fell into complete silence for a moment. "...Hey..." As the Lord drew closer with an imposing air, the Captain stepped back. "...N-no, Lord Casimion, do you believe what she says...?" "...He was a regular at our shop... grumbled about the General and the Lord... and requested a light curse every time..." "...Wait a minute..." "It’s a lie! There’s no evidence..." "...Real name, Rancil Alzo Plot, twenty-nine years old, single... hobby is horse riding... habit is saying 'this is quite troubling'..." At Michelle's whisper, the Lord turned his gaze to me and pointed at the Captain. "...I don't care, just blow him away." "Burst Rondo."

ZUDOOOOOOM!

I didn't need to be told. The strike I fired blew the Captain high into the blue sky.

"...I-it’s that woman's fault..." "Shut up." *Smack*. The sole of my boot sank into the groaning Captain's face. "Listen. I'm not particularly angry because you caused this incident. But if you're the real culprit, you should at least show your face now and then as a matter of courtesy! But for your name not to even come up until the very end, and you're the real culprit!? I won't forgive that!" "...No... even if you say that..." The Lord also stood by me, looking down at the Captain with anger. "In the first place, causing such a mess just because you were rejected by a woman is outrageous!" ...Fortunately, he was more shocked that his own Captain of the Guard had caused such an incident than by my calling him the mastermind, and his anger was directed at the Captain. The Captain said with a pathetic voice and expression, "...But what do you think that woman said to me when I approached her? 'I don't like men with dark personalities who put curses on others'!" ...Tch... that might make someone feel like killing... "Well, motive aside, a crime is a crime! Suffer the punishment! Take him away!" In response to the Lord's command, soldiers grabbed the Captain by both arms and dragged him away. "...I have troubled everyone in town! I shall give the Captain of the Guard his due punishment!" The Lord declared this unilaterally and left for the castle with the soldiers. "—So, Michelle." I patted her shoulder. "The details aside, your misunderstanding has been cleared. From now on, you'll be able to get along with the townspeople." "...Thank you... Lina... When we return to the forest house... I will definitely reward you..." "...W-wait! What happens to my reward in this case!?" Naga, reacting to the word 'reward,' spoke to no one in particular, but the townspeople turned away. ...Well... she was just being swept along by the situation this time... she probably won't get a fee... "So, Michelle, it'll be hard from now on, but do your best." "...........?" Not understanding the meaning of my words, she only frowned slightly.

And so, one incident ended. Later, according to a rumor I heard in another town,

'there's an incredibly cute sorceress in Carmidone City, and she’s having a hard time because so many men are approaching her.' See. I knew it would be hard. But of course, now— It was none of my business.

(The Forest of the Sorceress: End)

Beard, Once Again

The light from my magic reflected off the surroundings, creating a brilliant sparkle amidst the darkness. "I feel like I've been finding a lot of places like this lately. Oh well, I'm not complaining. Talk about lucky!"

Inside the room that had been sealed in darkness were crates of gold and silver treasures, handicrafts, and items that looked like magical artifacts. I had discovered what appeared to be ruins in the middle of a certain mountain, and right before my eyes lay a literal mountain of loot.

"With this, tonight I can really blow some—" "I'm sorry, but you’ll have to give up on that."

The voice came from behind me—from the passage I had just walked through. What’s more, it was a voice I recognized. I turned around to see five figures standing there. And in the middle of them, looking down at me pompously with his arms crossed, was...

"Neid!?" The man’s name escaped my lips before I could think.

I had last met him about a month ago inside some ruins near Tiagias City. His father, Sid, had expanded his power within the Mages' Guild by plotting to monopolize the research rights and treasures found in ruins. Behind the scenes, however, he had been selling off the treasures or destroying artifacts that were inconvenient for his personal research.

Neid, sensing this, had teamed up with me to expose Sid’s actions and crush his ambitions. As a result, the History Research Department and the Ruin Excavation Team of the Tiagias City Mages' Guild, which Sid headed, were supposed to have been disbanded.

And yet, here we were. Among the group standing with Neid were faces I had seen before in Sid’s old department.

"...What do you mean, 'give up'?" "Simply put—I'm sorry for you, but these treasures are being seized by the Tiagias City Mages' Guild, Neo-History Research Department, Ruin Excavation Team Mk-II."

"Wait just a minute!" I screamed at the top of my lungs. "What’s with this 'Neo' and 'Mk-II' stuff? Wasn't that department supposed to be disbanded!?"

"Exactly! But it has been reborn and reorganized! That is why it’s called Neo and Mk-II!" He declared this with an arrogant attitude that made no sense. Then, with a faraway look in his eyes, he continued: "...It’s true that my old man was wrong... but the philosophy itself—investigating the truth of history through thorough research of ruins—was never wrong! This is something someone has to do eventually! Or so my father told me the other day."

"Wait a second, you're being tricked again!" I snapped back with everything I had. ...Come to think of it, this guy was a pro at being manipulated by his father’s silver tongue. It looked like he’d been completely taken in once again.

"Fortunately, the foundation of the organization was already in place. Though, of course, I couldn't put my father in charge. So this time, *I* have taken over as the head of the Neo-History Research Department!" "...And where is Sid, exactly?" "Special Consultant." "...See? You're being tricked. Again." "In what way!?" "I mean... in every way, from start to finish."

"It’s no wonder you’re anxious, knowing about the previous incident," he said. "But rest assured! As long as I—a hero of organizational reform with a reputation for integrity and a huge hit with the tavern girls—am the one in charge, such mistakes will never happen again!"

I couldn't help but think that having a guy whose main goal in life was to be popular with tavern girls in charge was already a huge mistake. Actually, I had a feeling he was being tricked by those tavern girls, too. But he didn't seem like the type to

realize his own faults even if I pointed them out.

The real problem wasn't whether he was being tricked or not. It was that Sid was using his son's name as a cover to pull the same stunts as before. I couldn't let that slide. More than anything, I couldn't let it slide for the sake of the treasure I had just found.

"...Fine," I said, nodding. "But even if you tell me things have 'improved,' I won't know *how* they've improved just by listening. So—I'm going to observe. I want to see the activities of this 'Neo-History Research Department' for myself."

Tiagias City was a town that flourished as a transportation hub. The building for the small Mages' Guild was located in a corner of that town. "...Hey, aren't we going to the Guild?" I asked Neid and the others as they walked right past it. "Oh, the room they gave us at the Guild was too cramped. We're doing our research at my house."

See? He's definitely being tricked, I muttered to myself. Incidentally, the ownership of the treasure in the ruins was on hold until things were cleared up, so nobody had touched it yet. In other words, if I could prove Sid was tricking Neid, that treasure would be mine!

Eventually, we arrived at Sid and Neid's house in the center of town. I had seen it from the outside before, but honestly, it was bigger than the Guild building. It wasn't flashy, but it was solidly built. In the large hall past the entrance, various items presumably found in ruins were on display.

"Father! I'm back!" There was a brief pause after Neid called out. "—Ah. So, how did it go...!" Sid emerged from the front door, but when he spotted me, his face went completely stiff. On his lip was the mustache he was supposed to have lost. His clothes were the same as before, too. That alone was proof that he hadn't changed at all.

"Y-you're Lina Inverse! Why are you here!?" "We happened to run into each other at the ruins," Neid said, completely failing to notice how Sid's mustache was trembling with agitation. "When I told her about the Neo-History Research Department, she said she wanted to see if we were working seriously, so I brought her along." "...I... I see."

"By the way, I've been meaning to ask: why do you get so flustered whenever I'm around?" I asked Sid, who was desperately trying to act calm. "I-I am not flustered! I

was simply surprised... that’s all. Especially after the last incident... well, if that's the case, feel free to observe however you like." He looked away and hurried off as if he were running away.

I mean, honestly, at this point he was suspicious a million times over. He was definitely up to something. Which meant I was definitely going to catch him and get that treasure! I patted Neid on the shoulder. "Well then, I’ll be observing and making sure there’s no foul play. I'll need a room, and I’ll be expecting three meals a day for a while."

"What!? You’re planning to stay here!?" "Of course. —Now listen closely, Neid," I lowered my voice. "What—just *what* do you think would happen if Sid were using you to do the same things as before? Everyone would think you were an accomplice in his crimes. If that happened... what do you think would become of you?"

Neid’s face went pale. "Impossible! If that happened, all the trust I’ve spent my life building with the tavern girls would...!" *I don't think you ever had any,* I thought, but I pressed on. "Even if they didn't go that far, if word got out that you were tricked into helping with crimes, they might say, 'Oh, I guess he’s just the kind of guy who gets easily fooled by villains,' and turn their backs on you."

"T-that would be a disaster! If the girls turned their backs on me... how would I go on living!?" Does it really bother you that much? Just based on your reputation with tavern girls? Well, whatever. The important thing was to trick—I mean, *persuade*—Neid and create favorable conditions for my investigation.

"But on the other hand, what if you cooperated with me and exposed the villainy? The girls might say, 'Hey, did you hear? Neid pretended to be tricked so he could expose his father’s crimes. Not many people could do that. I think I’m starting to like him—' ...That’s the kind of thing they might think." "I'll do it!" Neid replied instantly, his breathing heavy with excitement. *Thank you, you moron.* And so, I began my stay at the house, three meals included.

"...Still... what should I do...?" That night, I muttered to myself as I tossed and turned for the umpteenth time in the bed of my assigned room. I had looked around the laboratory and warehouse today, but obviously, I wasn't going to find proof of a crime just by doing that. I planned to start the real investigation tomorrow, but the question was where to begin.

Normally, the standard method would be to cross-reference the list of excavated items with the actual stock to see if anything was being funneled out. But when I asked Neid about a list today, his answer was: "Eh? Do we have to make a list?" ...Yeah, I shouldn't expect anything from him.

That meant I had to find another way. For example, catching Sid in the act of a transaction. But honestly, that was nearly impossible. During the previous incident, Sid didn't make a single deal while Neid and I were investigating. As long as I was here, he wouldn't move. That left finding physical evidence at the shop he was dealing with... but how was I going to manage that?

As I turned these thoughts over in my head, I found myself unable to sleep. A significant amount of time passed, and just as I was finally starting to drift off... I heard a sound. It wasn't the night wind outside the window. It was similar to the rustling of distant leaves, but slightly different.

And more than anything, what bothered me was the bizarre atmosphere filling the room. It was somewhat like the feeling when someone is launching a night attack, yet different. There was no presence of a person anywhere. It was a strange sensation I had never experienced before. Still, there was no doubt that *something* was happening. I muttered an incantation under my breath.

"Lighting!" Under the sheets, I created a magical light with lowered intensity. By filtering it through the sheets, a dim glow should have illuminated the room—but it didn't. Though the sheets were glowing faintly, the walls and ceiling were still shrouded in darkness. ...Wait, that wasn't it.

A creepy chill ran down my spine. The darkness was undulating slightly. No—that wasn't darkness at all; it was something black covering the entire room. *No way!?* An idea flashed through my mind, and I began chanting another spell. As if sensing this, the blackness covering the room surged! It encroached upon the edge of the bed, dyeing it black, and rushed toward me from all sides as if to crush me— Just in time, I finished my spell!

"Explosion Array!" (Bakuenbu) *Pop-pop-pop-pop-pop!* It was a spell that caused countless small explosions. It looked flashy, but its lethal power wasn't very high. However...

Boom! The moment the spell went off, the room was dyed the color of crimson lotus. Simultaneously, I kicked off the bed, slammed into the door, and tumbled out into the hallway. The flames licking at my back vanished instantly. When I turned back toward

the fire, there was nothing left—neither fire nor the blackness that had covered the room. Only the smell of burning hung in the air.

"...Phew..." As I let out a small sigh, I heard the sound of footsteps running down the hallway. "What was that!? What was that sound!?" Neid and the live-in servants arrived in a panic. "...I was attacked. By something." "By what?" "...Who knows? By the way, where's Sid?" "Eh? My father?" At my question, Neid looked around with a bewildered expression. "I... I don't know? I assume he's sleeping in his room..." "—Fine, whatever."

I muttered and stepped back into the room. On the bed, the magical light I had created was still shining, illuminating the interior. Left on the floor were some charred black remnants— "W-what is this!?" Neid cried out in shock at the sight.

"—So, what is it? What did you want to talk about?" The following morning, Neid and I called Sid into a room in the mansion, saying we had something to discuss. In front of Sid, who sat there playing dumb, I tossed *it* onto the table. It landed with a soft *thud* and spread out. "...Hair?" Sid muttered at the sight.

"This is what attacked me in the middle of the night," I said. "It's a bit thick for hair, don't you think? It's probably—black mustache hair." "....." Sid remained silent. Yes. What had attacked me was a wave of undulating mustache hair that had covered the entire room. If I thought about it too much, it was really gross. At any rate, it had easily caught fire and retreated when hit by my attack spell.

"Come to think of it, you used that during your fight with Neid before. I forgot the name, but... the spell that lets you grow and control your own mustache. And your mustache is—black." "—I hope you don't mean to suggest that *I* used that spell to attack you?" "I'm not suggesting it, I'm saying it. I don't suppose you think you can talk your way out of something this blatant, do you?" "Talk my way out of what? I didn't do anything." He spoke with total brazenness, then suddenly paused as if thinking. "...Hmm... I believe your room was... I see. That might be it." Muttering to himself, he stood up. "Sorry, but could you come with me for a moment?" "...For what?" "It's simple. I'm going to clear up this misunderstanding."

Neid and I exchanged looks. Still, since he put it that way, I couldn't exactly ignore him. "Fine. Where are we going?" "To your room. Just come with me. I'll explain afterward." So the three of us went to the room where I had stayed. The fire had only licked the room for a second; the carpet fibers were a bit shriveled, but that was the

extent of the evidence left by the incident.

"Hmm..." Sid looked around the room as if searching for something. Suddenly, he flung open the closet and pulled out the side table drawer. "...What are you doing?" "I'm looking for it... Aha! Here it is." He picked something up from the gap between the closet and the wall and stood it up on the side table. It was a white doll about the size of a palm. It seemed to be modeled after a man—but around the face area, there was a black, crusty mass of a different color.

"...What is this?" "I discovered it in some ruins once... it's likely some kind of ritual tool. I call it the 'White Mustache Doll'." "Mustache?" "Yes. See this black mass on the mouth? These were black whiskers. For some reason, only that part wasn't stone; it had human hair implanted into it. That's why I speculated it was a ritual tool... and those whiskers... they grow. If you leave them be." "...Oh..." I wasn't sure how to react, so I just gave a vague response. I'd certainly heard of cursed dolls whose hair grew... but a doll with a growing mustache? I didn't know whether to be scared or just point and laugh.

"I had it tucked away in some room... I had no idea it had slipped into a gap like this. You used a fire spell when you repelled those whiskers last night, didn't you? What used to be a magnificent mustache has been scorched and shriveled into this mass." "...Um... surely you aren't going to claim that the doll's mustache grew out and attacked me?" "Exactly! Look closely at this doll. The hair on its head is quite thin. In other words! Out of jealousy and resentment toward your long hair, the doll's mustache must have grown and attacked you!" "AS IF THAT WOULD EVER HAPPEN!" "But the logic does seem sound," Neid chimed in. "IT IS NOT!" I snapped at both of them.

In reality, it probably went like this: Sid figured that if he caught me off guard while I was sleeping, he might be able to take me down. But if he went himself, he risked being counterattacked. So he thought of a long-distance attack using his mustache. Sid had used a spell to grow and control his mustache before. But that had been burned by Neid's spell. So he figured if I counterattacked, I'd use a fire spell too. Predicting that, he hid this doll with the singed mustache in my room as an excuse in case he failed. He'd left the table during dinner last night; he probably did it then. As for his own mustache scorched by my spell, he probably just fixed it with magic. ...Or so I thought, but it was true that I didn't have any definitive proof. He'd probably already planned out how to answer any comeback I had.

I tried one: "Then shall we experiment with this doll to see if that phenomenon really

occurs?" Sid acted like he was considering it. "...Even if we did, now that the whiskers—the core of the curse—have been burned away like this, there's no telling if the same thing will happen again." *See? I knew he'd say that*. If that was the case, pursuing the matter further was probably pointless. "Fine, let's leave it at that then," I said simply, then gave Sid a quiet stare. "—But in the future, please don't leave 'cursed dolls' like this in the guest rooms." "Oh, I shall be most careful." Sid returned a defiant smirk. He took the dark aura I was radiating in stride. Oh, just you wait! You can act all composed for now, but I'll definitely catch you and finish you off today or tomorrow! As we locked eyes and sparks flew, I made a vow in my heart that was just a little bit villainous.

The Priston Company, a second-hand dealership in a corner of town. I visited this place a little before noon. It was a shop that had dealt with Sid in the past. I thought Sid might still be using this place, so I decided to check it out first. There was a chance I'd be recognized from my previous investigation, so I was currently disguised as a suspicious mage, wearing a black hood pulled low and a black cloak covering my whole body.

Fortunately, there were no customers. I approached the counter and spoke to a young man who looked like a clerk, muffling my voice. "—The manager." "...Um... excuse me, but what is your business?" He looked at me suspiciously, but I kept my tone the same. "Tell him I'm from Lord Sid's place. He'll understand." "—Ah! Yes, please wait a moment!" He hurried into the back. Of course, I wasn't lying. I *had* come from Sid's house. I just hadn't said I was on his side.

Before long, an old man with a white beard emerged from the back. He came to the counter and, before I could even open my mouth, said: "Is this about the transactions?" *Jackpot*. However, I kept my voice and expression neutral. "Yes." But the old manager looked bitter. "I'm sorry, but... please tell him that we must decline any transactions like the ones we had before." "—!?" ...Wait, so they *weren't* dealing with him now? The manager continued as I stood there surprised. "It's all well and good that he gives us a low price, but the condition that we can't sell the items in this city makes it quite difficult to move them... and there are costs for transport and such. And... it's hard to say this, but... honestly, since the last incident, our reputation hasn't been great. True, selling found treasure is something skilled warriors and mages do often, and we deal in such things frequently. But... with all due respect, Lord Sid preached a great cause and used the backing of the Mages' Guild to restrict others from doing the same thing, while he was doing it himself... once the

world found out we were the ones dealing with him, our customers dropped off and we've had trouble with others in the trade... and on top of that, we can't afford to have holes blown in our walls like last time. So, I'm sorry, but we'd like to refrain from further business."

"...I... see..." I see. Even if they could buy treasure from Sid relatively cheaply, if they were being shunned by their peers and customers and couldn't sell it, they'd just be racking up a deficit. In other words—he wasn't dealing with this place anymore... "I understand. I'll tell him." I turned on my heel and left the shop. But if that was the case, who *was* he dealing with?

Next, I interviewed the assistants. Sid's old History Research Department had quite a few assistants, collaborators, and hangers-on. But once they found out about Sid's embezzlement and destruction of artifacts, they had all left him. ...Well, whether they left because they were disillusioned or just because they had to for the sake of their own positions, I didn't know. At any rate, many of those who were supposed to have left seemed to have returned to this Neo-History Research Department, which was headed by Neid on paper and Sid in practice. In fact, in the mansion's laboratory, I saw quite a few faces I recognized from the last incident. How did they view Sid? Were there any clues to be found there?

The testimonies I gathered went like this: "I was disillusioned when Sid did those things, but I like researching this stuff. That's why I'm helping." (22-year-old Mage) "Honestly, I need a paycheck. As long as I'm doing this, I won't go hungry, right? Sid? He used to be really annoying about things, but he isn't so much now. Neid hardly says anything at all. It's an easy gig." (31-year-old Mage) Most followed that pattern, but there was also this one: "I came back to keep an eye on Sid so he doesn't pull that kind of stunt again. Ever since this Neo-History Research Department was formed, I've been following him whenever he goes out to make sure he isn't up to no good. Well, he seems to be acting seriously so far." (55-year-old Mage)

At this point, it was practically stalking. Of course, there was a chance this old mage was actually a plant by Sid to feed me lies. At any rate, the second day passed without me gaining a single piece of useful information.

"...So...? What was that drum sound that was going on all night?" "It was likely a war drum used in ancient times. It's thought to have been used to inspire fighting spirit.

Did it get you too excited to sleep?" "It was too noisy to sleep!" I had light circles under my eyes as I asked, and Sid answered me simply. On the morning of the third day, I had been completely sleep-deprived by the drum sound that had echoed in my room all night. Once again, I had cornered Sid along with Neid to ask what was going on.

"...And? Why did that only echo in my room starting yesterday?" "Hmm... in the era when that was used, battle was a kind of ritual, a sacred thing that only men should perform. There are signs that women were forbidden from it. My guess is—by having you, a woman who should be taboo, stay in the room where it used to be kept, some kind of curse was triggered and the sound was heard." "I see... that logic makes sense." "NO IT DOESN'T!" I snapped at Neid, who was nodding along. "If it rang for that reason every time, it would be going *boom-boom-boom* every time a female assistant touched it or a maid walked past the room!" "That's true! I didn't realize that!" Neid said. "THINK!" "Well then, how about this: it reacted to your 'chi,' since you're so used to battle?" Sid suggested. "I see! That I can accept—" "DON'T!" I cut Neid off. "And what's with 'how about this' or 'how about that'!?" "...I understand you're irritable from lack of sleep, but it's a bit much for you to take it out on me." Sid said with a composed expression, arrogantly stroking his mustache.

...Y-you...! How shameless! I glared at Sid. "I see... you're just making up excuses about curses to keep harassing me and try to drive me out as soon as possible..." "What a terrible misunderstanding. I have no idea what you're talking about." "But on the flip side! The fact that you're doing this means it would be bad for you if I kept poking around!" "That, too, is a misunderstanding. After all—right now, I really am not doing any embezzling or destruction of finds." "Right now? Does that mean—you plan to do it in the future?" "Another misunderstanding. I am simply saying that I made such mistakes in the past. I won't do such things this time. I intend to continue my research, build up a record of success, gain recognition, and eventually ask for the cooperation of other Mages' Guilds." He gave a meaningful, smirk.

It was true that even last time, Sid had taken "measures to not lose" rather than "measures to win." And not much time had passed since the last incident. In other words... was he really not doing any embezzlement right now? However, Sid would surely repeat the same thing eventually. That defiant smirk just now was proof. He had a considerable amount of savings from the last time. He would first get recognized, grow the organization, and get a monopoly on ruins nationwide—he could wait until after that to fatten his own pockets. If that happened, I might not be able to do anything about it next time. Before that happened—while I still could—I needed to crush his ambitions somehow. And yet, with the current situation where I didn't

even have a tail to catch...

"...Then... why the harassment?" "I told you, didn't I? It's a misunderstanding." Damn... I guess he wasn't going to let anything slip with just this much prodding... "To be honest, though, there's the matter of the previous incident. It's true that I feel a certain sense of unease around you. And honestly—your food expenses are more than I expected. Since you're a guest Neid invited, it isn't my place to tell you to leave, but it's true that you're a nuisance. Research doesn't progress when you spend all your time talking to the assistants under the guise of 'investigating.' If you plan to stay for more than a few days, I'll have to ask you to pay for your food and board."

...Urgh...! Charging me for food...! He went there! That's a low blow. Sid smirked, arrogantly stroking his mustache. "—Or perhaps you're planning to install yourself as Neid's uninvited wife and aim for a life of luxury?" "...Wh—!?" "What are you saying, Father!" It was Neid who shouted in anger even before I could. "It's true that Miss Lina is cute, but what would she do with such a meager chest!?" "Hold it right there." "It was a joke. Don't get so worked up, Neid. I'll find a proper bride for you." Does that mean I'm not "proper"? But again, before I could snap back— "Don't do anything unnecessary, Father! I've already made up my mind about the proper girls for me—the tavern girls!" "No. Those aren't proper at all. Not even close. And you used the plural 'girls'!" "Anyway! I'm telling you not to do anything unnecessary! I'm working hard in my own way! How many of the gems and ornaments I've found do you think I've given as presents to make the tavern girls happy!?"

..... "...Eh?" After a moment of silence and freezing, both Sid and I let out a dumbfounded cry at the same time. "...Wait... N-Neid, you don't mean...?" "Are you telling me you've been giving some of the treasure you found to tavern girls!?" "Yeah," Neid said quite simply. "They said they wanted them. Besides, the things that are really necessary for research are usually plain-looking. The girls don't really want those, so it works out perfectly." "IT DOES NOT WORK OUT PERFECTLY AT ALL!" Sid's scream echoed. "W-why!? Unlike my father, I'm not getting any money for them, so it isn't embezzlement!" "IT *IS* EMBEZZLEMENT!" Sid and I snapped at the same time. And then... "...Heh... hee-hee-hee-hee-hee..." A low laugh escaped my lips and echoed in the room. I stood up and pointed a finger straight at Sid. "Looks like this is the end! Sid! No matter how careful you were being, if Neid—the one you were using as a cover—was doing stuff like this, it's all over!" "...Urgh...! To think I won the battle but lost to my own kin...!" "Hey, I don't really get what's going on," Neid said, sounding like he'd just woken up. Sid shot him a sharp glare. "It means! Because you went and gave the treasure you found to tavern girls, the Neo-History Research Department is finished!" "What!? Why!?" "Aaaaaaargh! This

boy!" Sid held his head for a while. "Anyway! I'll skip the detailed explanation, but if that Lina Inverse reports what you did to the Mages' Guild, Neid, you won't be popular with the tavern girls anymore!" "What!? Is that true, Father!?" "It's true! Have I ever lied to you!?" *Snap back. Instantly. With everything you've got. You have, all the time.* But Neid, whose head was full of tavern girls, could only flail around in a panic. "T-that can't be! Then what am I supposed to do...!"

"—Please!" Sid suddenly bowed his head to me. "It's true that both I and Neid went about things the wrong way! But... I don't want to crush my dream or Neid's future! I won't do anything like this again, and I won't let him do it either! So somehow... could you turn a blind eye to this incident!?" "Even if you say that, a mustache-geezer's dream and the future of a guy who's obsessed with tavern girls are none of my business." "Aah! I knew it!" "Please, somehow!" Now Neid was trying to persuade me, too. "If you keep quiet, I'll introduce you to a pretty girl at the tavern next time!" "I WOULDN'T BE HAPPY ABOUT THAT AT ALL!" "Why not!?" "I mean, look at you." "...If it's come to this... there's no choice left!" With fire in his eyes, Sid stood up and pointed at me. "Listen well, Neid! Now that it's come to this, the only way to maintain your relationships with the tavern girls is to defeat this woman, Lina Inverse!"

Ho ho... so he finally lost his patience and was resorting to force. But when it came to violence—I mean, combat—both Sid and Neid were amateurs. "B-but Father! There's no way we can win against her! Not us!" "There are times when a man must stand his ground, even if his chances of winning are slim! Now is that time! Go, Neid!" "I... I understand, Father!" Neid shouted and started to lift himself up—and then. *Wham.* He took my heel drop right to the head and went silent before he could even stand. "Aah! How cowardly!" "Shut up! If you're going to talk about that, you guys are two against one, and I'm under no obligation to wait for my opponent to get into a fighting stance!" I took a stance half-turned toward Sid, who was shouting protests. "—So? You still planning to come at me?" "Hmph. You're naive, little girl. It would be lucky if I won, but it's nearly impossible against you. Furthermore, I have no desire to experience pain! It was obvious that I'd egg on my son with that in mind! I declare an unconditional, total surrender!" "DON'T ACT SO PROUD OF IT!"

Boom.

With a surge of anger, I released a single attack spell that blew Sid away along with the room.

And so, Sid’s ambitions were once again utterly crushed. Looking back, Neid had been tricked by someone right up until the end. ...Well... he seemed like the kind of guy who was better off being socially buried early on... At any rate, the organization was disbanded, and Sid and Neid became just ordinary mages with no titles. Surely, a comeback would be impossible this time. Furthermore, the Council Chairman of the Tiagias City Mages' Guild was asked to resign after his management ability was questioned, seeing as he had been lured by donations into repeating the same mistake twice. I didn't know the character of the new Chairman, but he probably wouldn't be stupid enough to try for a third time. In other words—there would never be a History Research Department Z or a Ruin Excavation Team Part 3.

And. It was decided that the treasure from the ruins I first discovered could be kept by the first discoverer—namely, me! In a bright mood, I returned to the first ruins— "...Huh...?" I stood dumbfounded in the treasure room. The treasure that was supposed to be piled high—was gone. Well, a little bit was left, but most of it had vanished. ...What... exactly...?

"Ho-ho-ho-ho-ho! I don't know who you are, but you were just a bit too late! ...Wait, isn't that you, Lina?" I heard a loud, annoying laugh behind me. I turned around to see, as expected, the idiot woman in the stupid costume. "Hmph! It seems you found this place, but what a pity! It looks like you were a step too late! I found these ruins first just two days ago, and I’ve already turned most of the treasure into money and blown it on— ...Wait... Lina... what’s with those scary eyes...? I... I guess I can't help it. I suppose I could give you a few percent of what’s left here... Hey, what are you so mad about? Say something... Why are you suddenly chanting a spell!? I said say something!"

—And so. Crimson flowers bloomed on the mountain, and I missed out on most of the treasure I had found...

(Beard, Once Again: The End)

Afterword

Author: Gyaaaah! The New Year's holidays have come for me again! And this time, it's finally the big "Entering the 21st Century" event! My dear lady, what do you make of this!?

L: You're losing your mind right from the jump, before we've even said hello. It's the Author, after all. The New Year comes every year, doesn't it?

Author: You say that, but it's the 21st century! The *21st century*! Listen, when I was a kid, nobody believed something as unscientific as "the arrival of the 21st century" would actually happen!

L: ...Unscientific? What are you even...

Author: Well, it's true! Thanks to that French prophecy-geezer—who has now completely topped the "Oh yeah, I remember that guy" rankings—I've got it hard-wired into my genetic base pairs that such a thing could never come! At least I do! And yet, here we are, entering the 21st century without a single vote, advance notice, or phone survey! What kind of nerve is that?! Do you have no consideration for the feelings of a 20th-century pear*?!

> **Note:** A pun on *Nijusseiki Nashi* (20th Century Pear), a popular Japanese pear variety.

L: ...Um... so, if I translate that into Japanese... you're just hyper-tense because your deadlines are piling up even though you haven't actually done much work, and your brain is about to burst? Is that it?

Author: *Gugh-gefuh!* (Spluttering blood)

L: Ah. Bullseye.

Author: ...Excuse me, young lady... could you perhaps refrain from using a person's hematemesis as a pass/fail gauge?

L: Why not? It's easy to understand.

Author: ...An-anyway... I present to you *Slayers Special: Scramble Grill*.

L: Right then. Now that the greetings are out of the way, I suppose the next topic is the whole "New Year's cards" situation?

Author: *Guggefu.*

L: Aaaah, there he goes, coughing up blood again. This guy... does that mean you're behind on those, too?

Author: *Kukuu!* I'll refrain from commenting... but thinking about it, a full cycle of the Zodiac has passed since I made my professional debut...

L: Has it really been that long?

Author: Yeah. The first year I debuted in *Dragon Magazine*, there were so few fan letters that I hand-wrote all the New Year's replies. The year after that, I used a *Print Gocco* to make bad drawings of Lina, Naga, and Gourry. And then the year after that, the catchphrase was: "Since it's the Year of the Monkey, the picture on the card is L!" So there's no mistake.

L: Wait. That catchphrase.

Author: Calm down, calm down, it's a joke! A joke! Please, let go of that! A concrete breaker does not suit a lovely girl like you.

L: That flattery is painfully transparent... but fine. That was my New Year's card debut, after all. But wow, a full Zodiac cycle, huh?

Author: It really snuck up on me! Dammit. While I wasn't looking, time just kept going *tick-tock*! And here I am, still feeling like I'm about eighteen!

L: And yet, somehow, you've become two eighteen-year-olds put together.

Author: *Gubabuuh!* ...D-don't say "two of them"! That hurts!

L: ♪ *Coughing up blood is a sign of your age~* ♪

Author: *Guh!* T-that's not true!

L: No. Don't start saying "is not!" at your age. It just fills me with a sudden urge to kill.

Author: L-let's just put that murderous intent and the concrete breaker aside for a moment. But seriously, time really does fly. Once it's over, it feels like a flash. It feels

like just the other day I heard Utamaru-shisho's* annual New Year's gag—"There are only eleven and a half months left of this year"—and now they're already advertising the *Shoten* charity calendars.

Note: References to the long-running Japanese comedy show *Shoten*.

L: Look, even if you drop those references, how many *Slayers* readers actually watch *Shoten*?

Author: Regardless of *Shoten*, the point is that time moves fast. It's truly precious. Time. I wonder if there's a way to control your subjective perception of time.

L: Subjective time? Not actual time? Like, how the same amount of time can feel fast or slow?

Author: Exactly. Controlling real time is probably impossible, and even if I could, if I was the only one with speed, I'd just age faster than everyone else. I wouldn't want that.

L: Oh, I have one. A way to control subjective time.

Author: Seriously?!

L: Yeah. I heard it's proportional to your heart rate. So, you just need to transplant the heart of a mouse, which beats at a ridiculous speed! Fortunately, for some reason, I happen to have a mouse heart and a transplant kit right here ♪

Author: Wait! Why would you have those here?!

L: Oh, I just thought something like this might happen.

Author: So you spend your daily life thinking about transplanting a mouse heart into me?!

L: Quite frequently, yes. The transplant kit suits me better than the concrete breaker, don't you think?

Author: No, wait, calm down! Don't come at me with that syringe! Why is the liquid inside green?! I'm sorry! I have a feeling a mouse heart transplant would significantly shorten my *actual* lifespan along with my subjective time, so I'll pass!

L: No need to be modest in the face of scientific progress.

Author: THAT’S RIDICULOOOOOOOOOOOOOUS!

(Undergoing Surgery)

L: —Everyone— Do you know the saying, "Failure is the mother of success"? ...Or was it the father? Well, either way is fine. Regardless, I have firmly pledged in my heart to turn this failure into tomorrow’s success. Or, to put it loosely: "I’m going to do it again without learning my lesson."

That said, lately I've been thinking I'd like to give the concrete breaker some more spotlight next time. I’d love to hear your thoughts. Well then, that’s all for today~ ♪

(Afterword: The End)